

HER WONDERLAND KINGS #1

War of Hearts

STEFANIE MARIE

WAR OF HEARTS
HER WONDERLAND KINGS: BOOK ONE

STEFANIE MARIE



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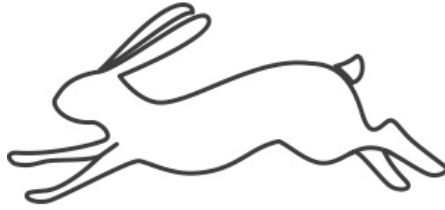
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CHAPTER 1



In Which I Ruin a Wedding, My Favorite Shirt, and Apparently a Fancy Banquet, Too, All in One Go

I'd made up my mind: I was leaving tonight, whether he liked it or not.

I rolled out of bed. Took one last look at the wedding dress hanging in the corner. I'd taken it out of its protective bag earlier, and now the sequins lining the bodice glittered brilliantly, each one catching a piece of the moonlight streaming in through my window.

Bryce had insisted that I would mess it up somehow if I took it out of that bag.

I'd done it the second he retired to the guest room, because screw him, and screw this would-be marriage.

I didn't need either to survive.

I wouldn't have minded keeping that gorgeous dress, though.

With a sigh, I turned my back on said dress, grabbed my already half-packed bag and plopped it onto the bed. I snatched my phone from the nightstand too, and after firing off a text to my best friend Rachel — *I'm actually doing it. Standby for my arrival. Get the wine ready plz. And maybe lookup the number for the police department, just in case* — I finished flinging a few final necessities into the bag, starting with the stuffed penguin Rachel had given me on my sixth birthday. Then came the collar of my recently-deceased dog, Gizmo. A picture of my long-ago deceased parents on their wedding day. My grandmother's diamond necklace. My vibrator. Yeah, I know, one of those things is not like the others, but a girl has physical needs too, you know?

My phone buzzed.

i'll meet you at the school. and very funny on that last 1, said Rachel.

The police department thing, she meant. She probably laughed (uncomfortably) because I've joked before that Bryce probably needed to be locked up. I always followed it up with *just kidding*.

But there's a little truth behind every *just kidding*—pretty sure I'd read that on some emo kid's facebook status. Also pretty sure it was true, at least in my case.

There was a reason, after all, that I'd been with Bryce for almost nine years.

It was the same reason that I was making my daring escape at two a.m., sneaking out like a teenager afraid of being punished instead of simply walking out the front door like a twenty-three-year old adult.

Because I was afraid.

He had never *physically* hurt me, but we'd had some frightening moments. And it was entirely possible that he was going to tackle me, drag me back inside, and tie me to the bed if he caught me trying to leave him.

Fucked up, but true.

My hand shook as I left my engagement ring on the nightstand, next to the bottle of anti-depressants that Bryce had insisted I needed years ago.

I wasn't convinced that those pills he'd been feeding me were actually what their label said they were, so I'd been weaning myself off of them in the weeks leading up to this escape—and the result was a mind that become free of fog for the first time in forever.

These past weeks I'd felt alive, and the vivid dreams I'd always had as a child had returned, reminding me that I once had plans to create beautiful, inspirational things with my life.

It had taken me far, far too long to admit to myself that I'd made a mistake trusting Bryce to have my best interests at heart, but once the seed of doubt had planted itself in my foggy mind, it grew surprisingly wild and quick, and then...

And, well, then it led to me repelling down the side of Bryce's three-story house with the aid of a rope and a harness I'd fashioned out of bed sheets and belts with the help of a Youtube tutorial video (seriously, what *can't* you learn to do from watching a Youtube video?).

Going out the normal way would have required me to walk past the guest room, and Bryce slept ridiculously lightly, like he was expecting

someone to try and kill him in his sleep. This method made me feel like an (exceptionally uncoordinated) spy, and it would bring me safe and secure to the head of the mile-long, winding driveway.

As soon as I touched down on that driveway, the motion-detection lights flipped on.

“Shit.”

Forgot about those.

I fought with my makeshift repelling contraption, untangled it after a moment’s struggle, shouldered my bag, and started to run.

I made it ten feet before I heard the garage door open.

The neighbor’s dogs started to bark. Someone yelled something that I couldn’t hear over that barking, and I made the mistake of looking up and far into the distance instead of concentrating on the steps directly in front of me.

So far to go.

The school where Rachel was supposed to be picking me up was another quarter mile up the road *after* I made my way down the ridiculously long driveway.

And I was slow.

God, I was so slow.

I always wished I could get as excited about running as I did about cake and tacos and such, but I just wasn’t that girl.

Bryce, on the other hand, had been an all-state champion in track during both high school and college. Not that he needed to catch me on foot; I was pretty sure I’d just heard the rumble of one of his ATVs starting up.

Just turn around and face him, tell him you want out, begged a terrified voice in the back of my mind.

But I knew how that would end— another argument like the one we’d had before bed, another dose of subtle threats and manipulation, and then me not being able to sleep because I’m too frightened I might have finally driven him to snap and do something crazy.

So I didn’t turn around.

I veered off the driveway, into the clutches of the trees that lined it.

Branches clawed at my face, caught my bag and jerked me mercilessly backward. I swung my bag to my chest instead, cradled it like a baby and pushed my way forward. The ground was muddy and slick

thanks to the rain we'd had yesterday, but somehow I managed to stay on my feet.

ATV headlights flashed across the tree trunks above and all around me.

Please don't see me. Please don't see me—

"Alex! What the hell are you doing?"

I didn't answer, didn't look back.

I saw a break in the trees ahead— a field, and the main road that ran alongside it.

I sprinted toward it.

I was running so fast that I didn't see the rotting log at the edge of the tree-line. My foot caught it and I tumbled, slammed my knee into a rock. The pain made my head spin. When things stopped swirling, I found myself lying on the ground, my face and my shirt caked in mud.

I no longer heard the sound of the ATV's engine.

I heard footsteps softly crunching through the wet leaves, branches being swept aside.

And then suddenly Bryce loomed over me, his hazel eyes appearing pure gold in the moonlight—*like a panther's*, I thought dimly.

"Alex, baby, what are you doing?" His hand grabbed my wrist as he spoke, not quite tight enough to hurt, but tight enough to say *don't even think about trying to crawl any further away*.

The pain in my knee must have been making me stupid, because I ignored the warning in his touch.

"I'm leaving," I mumbled, jerking away.

He stared after me, watched my pathetic attempts to stumble, to drag my throbbing knee along behind me across the field.

"We had a fight," he said, still behind me and sounding dangerously calm. "You're overreacting."

"This isn't just about the fight this evening. It's everything. It's... it's..." The pain in my knee was getting worse. I glanced back and found his face among the spinning trees, but I couldn't focus on words.

He folded his arms across his chest. Considered me with that condescending little tilt of his head. "Have you been taking your medication?"

"Fuck you," I replied.

“You haven’t taken it.” He sounded equal parts irritated and alarmed.
“Come on. We’re going back to the house.”

“No.”

“Now, Alex.” That warning in his touch had reached his voice.

I pulled my throbbing leg as straight and steady as I could manage, lifted my head higher, and defiantly started toward the road again.

He sprang after me so quickly that I didn’t have time to turn before his hand fell on my arm.

I lurched away and ended up falling to the ground.

I screamed—partly from the terror, partly from the pain of twisting my knee. I screamed louder than I ever have in my life, and the world around us suddenly... slowed.

The wind stopped blowing.

The crickets stopped chirping.

The stars dimmed.

I thought I was imagining it at first, but then I saw the way Bryce had halted as well. The way his eyes had gone wide.

In the silence, I heard the tinkling sound of bells.

Then it was drowned out by the rumble of splitting earth.

A massive sinkhole opened up directly in front of us, so close that we were forced to scramble backwards to avoid being sucked in.

We stopped once we’d made it fifteen feet or so. Bryce latched another restraining grip onto my wrist, but I was too distracted to fight it off. The two of us crouched in the field’s overgrown grass and stared without moving or speaking.

My heart thundered in my chest. The pain in my knee seemed to be migrating up to it, and each beat began to feel more and more like that heart of mine might slam straight through my skin and break a few ribs on the way out.

Then things got *weird*.

I heard voices. Several of them, coming from *inside* the sinkhole. And I was in the middle of trying to convince myself that there was no way I could be right about where those sounds were coming from, when all of a sudden a man hoisted himself up over the edge of the hole.

He was easily the most beautiful man I’d ever seen.

At least until two seconds later, when another, equally gorgeous man climbed out after him.

Then two more.

Four in total, and maybe it was the pain making me crazy again, but I swear every single one of them looked too handsome to be real.

This has to be a dream.

One of those beautiful dreams that I had been starting to have again after I stopped taking the pills. They were simply getting more and more vivid.

Come to think of it, those bells I heard a minute ago...

I couldn't help but feel like I'd heard those before— perhaps in a dream when I was a kid.

The only problem with my working theory was the massive amount of pain racketing through me. Because I don't remember even my weirdest dreams—or nightmares—ever causing me actual pain.

None of the four men appeared to have noticed us yet.

The one farthest from me, with piercing dark eyes and muscular arms covered in dozens of intricate tattoos, stretched to his full, impressive height and squinted into the darkness of the trees I'd just clambered through.

"The hell's going on here?" he demanded.

"Could you not talk with your mouth full, you cretin?" asked the one who'd climbed out after him. His eyes were framed by black-rimmed glasses, and that, along with the perfectly starched white shirt half-tucked into his tailored grey pants, made him look like a college professor so hot he shouldn't legally be allowed to teach.

"Like that fucking matters at the moment?" Tattooed Guy snapped back. But he swallowed hard before adding in a barely-audible mumble: "I'm starving, and my mouth is still full of food because *we just got unceremoniously whisked away mid-fucking bite*, if you didn't notice."

"Are you honestly worried about hunger right now?" sighed Professor.

"The chicken I slaved over is going to be stone cold—"

"Shut up, Caden," a third voice said. I couldn't see him very well behind the others, but his voice sounded more cheerful than the first two. "Your chicken wasn't even that good."

"It was kind of dry," Professor agreed, a touch of smugness in his voice.

“I’m never cooking for you assholes again,” Caden replied. “And also? Both of you can go straight to the deepest circle of hell.”

“All of you shut up,” interrupted the first man who’d emerged from the sinkhole.

My eyes drifted to him and, if possible, they widened even more.

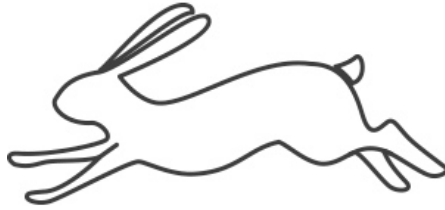
The other three went silent at his command, and I completely understood why—he didn’t look like the sort of man people ignored.

He was the tallest of the four. Even from a distance I could tell that every inch of his lithe body was well-muscled, probably perfectly capable of silencing people who *did* decide to ignore his commands. He held his head as if an invisible crown was sitting on top his short waves of blond hair, and his shirt was a rich indigo color and looked like it was made of silk or something—something that belonged on a king relaxing in a palace, not on some guy wandering around a wheat field in Western North Carolina.

“Shut up,” he repeated, “and look.”

And suddenly all four of them were staring at *me*, and one by one their eyes fell to my chest—to the faint red light that had started to glow around it.

CHAPTER 2



In Which Things Get Weirder, and I Do Something That's Maybe a Little Stupid

The king took several powerful strides toward us.

“Stay back,” Bryce warned. He wrapped an arm possessively around my waist, and the light glowing in my chest flickered out.

“Or what?” King asked, the corners of his lips curling into a confident smile that probably would have seemed incredibly attractive if I wasn’t so incredibly terrified.

Bryce’s grip around my waist tightened. He stood, roughly pulling me up with him and further jarring my hurt knee in the process.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to bite back a whimper of pain.

The instant the sound escaped my mouth, King’s sneer disappeared. “She’s hurt,” he said, accusingly.

“She’s fine,” Bryce snarled.

Annoyance burned through me.

I was so tired of him speaking for me.

I tried to pull my way free, which resulted in another yelp of pain and another bout of dizziness. And at some point while I was trying to find my senses through that pain, King closed the distance between us, reached behind me, and grabbed Bryce by the throat.

Bryce let me go.

I fell to my hands and knees. Scrambled away as fast as I could with the use of only one leg, and then glanced back just as the king lifted Bryce

with ease. He let my ex-fiance's feet dangle helplessly over the dry grass for a moment before flinging him across the field.

A cloud of dirt exploded around Bryce with the force of his impact. He coughed several times before trying to sit up—only to be met by the king once more as the imposing man stuck a boot on his chest and pinned him down.

“What is your name?” King demanded.

There was silence for a moment— Bryce being his usual arrogant little twit self and refusing to speak, even though his life might have depended on it.

I shouldn't have cared about his life at *all* maybe—not after the way he'd treated me—but I still didn't want to be a witness to murder, so I held my breath until that arrogant bastard finally choked out an answer.

“Bryce.”

“No. Your *true* name,” growled the king.

True name?

Bryce laughed.

The sound was taunting, cold, and creepy as hell as it echoed through the night.

“Wouldn't you like to know?” Bryce goaded.

Seriously, he was goading this man who looked like a king who could break him in half by barely lifting a finger.

It seemed stupid, even for Bryce.

Somehow I found the courage to get to my feet once more. I wasn't sure if I wanted to run toward my stupid ex-fiance or away from all this nonsense, but before I could take a single step in any direction, I felt a gentle hand against my elbow.

I turned, and found myself face-to-face with one of the four men—the cheerful-voiced one who I hadn't been able to see very well before.

I took a good look at him then, and I decided I wanted to stay a little longer.

He reminded me a bit of a boy I'd had a crush on in fourth grade—because of the calmness that he exuded, and the way he was all bright green eyes and dimples when he smiled. Like my former crush, this man also had just the right amount of quirkiness gracing his appearance; in his case, it was in the form of the emblem stitched into the maroon jacket he wore. It was an animal of some sort, I realized after a second of studying it

—an upside-down lion with wings and the head of an eagle, and a diamond clutched in its paws.

His dark hair was swept to one side, as effortlessly and neatly styled as the stubble along his chin and jawline. He wasn't as tall or powerful-looking as the king, but he gave the subtle impression of someone who was probably much stronger than he looked.

And he was definitely, undeniably handsome in that boy-next-door sort of way, and for a moment I found myself lost in the desire to simply sit and hold hands with him for a little while, maybe drag him to some of my favorite spots in the Blue Ridge Mountains and insist on stargazing.

He looked like the type of guy who wouldn't complain about that kind of date at all.

"You shouldn't put any weight on your knee, I don't think," he said, pulling me out of my short-lived daydream and back into the nightmare of my current reality.

I looked back at the king and Bryce, and my breath caught in my throat at the sight of the two of them squaring off, clearly prepared to start throwing punches.

"What is going on?" I asked the Boy Next Door. "Who *are* you people?"

"That's...kind of hard to explain."

"What's so hard about telling me your name?"

He hesitated another moment before giving in. "Emory. Emory Blackburn."

"And how the hell did you get here?"

"That's a good question."

He sounded as genuinely confused as I felt about it, so I didn't pressure him on the details. Instead I added, "Well *Emory Blackburn*, please tell your friend not to murder Bryce. I don't know how things work in Bottom of the Hole World or wherever the hell you came from, but here on Earth, people usually get in all kinds of trouble for that sort of thing."

"It's not really my place to tell him what not to do."

I jerked my head back to him. "What do you mean, it's not your place to stop a *murder*?"

"It's complicated," he said, frowning.

"Fine," I snapped, getting impatient with the circular conversation, "then *I'll* stop it myself."

“I told you, I don’t think you should move—”

Embarrassingly, he was right about that; I stumbled almost immediately, and his quick reflexes and hands on my waist were the only thing that kept me from another painful collision with the ground.

“Damn it,” I muttered.

He reached and tucked a strand of my hair—once blonde, now highlighted with lovely dark streaks of mud—behind my ear. His fingers grazed my jaw and lingered there.

My chest ached again, suddenly.

I looked down, and that strange glow from before was there again. Fainter this time. Slower, too, like the last pulses of a firefly’s radiance before its short life flickered out.

But it was undeniably *there*.

“What is happening to me?” I whispered.

His gaze swept through a whole range of emotions in a matter of moments—curiosity, sympathy, longing— but in the end he still had no clear answer to give me.

Then light exploded beside us.

Emory threw his arms around me, using his body to shield mine until the flash finally faded, and then we both cautiously peered back toward the fight.

Bryce was nowhere to be seen.

The king was backing away from where Bryce had only just stood, his eyes sweeping the field, his expression livid.

“He’s a Shade!” he roared.

Suddenly there was movement all around us as the other two men—Caden and the hot professor—snapped into action alongside the king. The three of them scoured the field, searching. The professor swept a hand toward the ground and the grass ignited into tall flames of white and red.

I heard the screech of tires as a car—the first one I’d seen on this relatively quiet country road—slammed on its brakes. It paused for a full minute, presumably long enough to call 911, and then raced away again.

Meanwhile, the flames burned in a perfect circle, providing light but not spreading past the path the professor had indicated for it.

“What the actual...”

“Come on,” Emory urged, draping my arm around his shoulders and helping me limp toward the cover of the trees. Once there, he leaned me

against a trunk and turned back to the scene in the field.

“This is bad,” he muttered, more to himself than me.

“What the fuck is a Shade?”

“A part of our world that shouldn’t be here in this one,” he replied, and then as an afterthought he glanced back at me and added: “And something that makes me even more curious about you.”

“Me?”

“Curiouser and curiouser...” he said, looking away.

I wanted to demand more answers from him.

But I was distracted, suddenly, by a bobbing white light that appeared just to my right, weaving in and out of the trees in an almost playful way that seemed to beckon me toward it.

I pushed away from the support of the tree and was surprised to find that my knee didn’t hurt at all as I chased after that glow. Or perhaps I was just so focused on catching it that I didn’t feel pain. I didn’t even think of pain, or anything at all until my hands finally closed over that luminescent orb and I squeezed it tightly against my skin.

The light turned cold.

It expanded, swallowing me until I was completely blind.

When it finally faded and my eyes adjusted again, I found myself inches away from the man I’d been so desperate to escape.

His hands reached for my throat.

I twisted away and Bryce caught a fistful of my hair instead. He jerked me back, and the pain of having my wavy locks nearly ripped out caused the pain in my knee to wake up as well. All of it flared through me, and I screamed, and the tinkling of bells filled my head.

Light flashed around my chest again.

Brilliant, rose-colored light that seemed to burn my ex-fiance.

He clutched his face and stumbled backward.

He was on his knees by the time the other four men appeared. Caden and the professor each grabbed an arm, yanked Bryce to his feet and slammed him against the nearest tree.

“Why is a Shade like you in this world?” the king demanded.

Bryce didn’t answer.

“Probably for the same reason we were drawn into this world rather—as Caden put it—*unceremoniously*,” the professor offered after a moment of silence. He tightened his grip on Bryce before letting his eyes slide to

me. “The girl. He seems determined not to let her get away, so one assumes he was assigned to *her*, for whatever reason. And that light she’s giving off...”

“Assigned?” the king repeated. And then a disgusting realization seemed to settle over him. “By the Nightmarcher, you mean,” he spat.

“Possibly. Presumably.”

“But why would he...” Caden trailed off.

“You don’t think she could be...” Emory began, and then let his words hang in the air as well.

“She’s just a girl,” Caden argued, “And a weak one at that. She fell for the Fool’s Light trick, and now look at the way she’s shaking, too.”

“Who *wouldn’t* be shaking after all of this?” I hissed.

He only smirked in response.

“And I have a name, you know,” I added. “It’s not *Girl*. It’s Alex.”

“Alice?” Emory repeated, sounding a bit awestruck.

“No, *Alex*. It’s short for Alexandra. Alexandra Kincade.”

Something about my full name made them all fall silent, and even Caden couldn’t seem to look smug about me anymore, so he simply looked away. The other three continued to study me for several moments past the point of uncomfortable, until the king finally cleared his throat and took a few steps toward me.

I automatically took a step back, wincing as I did.

“Your injury is severe,” he said.

“I’m fine.”

Something dark and commanding flashed across his face, and he took a moment to settle it before he continued. “We can heal you,” he said, “but you’ll have to come with us.”

“To where?”

“To our empire, of course.”

“Riiiiight. And where might *that* be?”

“Back the way we came,” he said, nodding toward the field.

“Uh-huh. So you want me to jump into a sinkhole that just randomly appeared and started vomiting out magical people.”

“Yes.”

“Thanks for the invite, but I think I’m going to have to pass.”

“Pass?”

“Yeah. Because you’re all crazy, and none of this is real.”

His expression was stern, his tone unyielding. “It’s all very real.”

“She’s not going anywhere,” Bryce interjected with another of those horrible, taunting laughs. “Earth is her home. She belongs to *me*. And you can restrain me, but you can’t kill me in this world. You know that. So why don’t you four just run along and leave us be?”

“Shut up, Shade,” Caden snapped.

“I don’t *belong* to you, Bryce,” I added, bristling.

I turned away so I wouldn’t have to look at him anymore, and my gaze shifted to the road, and I remembered my original mission.

Rachel.

I couldn’t keep her waiting any longer.

I managed to hobble all the way back to the bag that I’d dropped, to paw through it until I located my cell phone. As expected, I had multiple new texts and missed calls, all from my best friend.

If I could just get to her, we could sort all of this craziness out over a bottle (or two, or eight) of wine.

Right?

Solid plan—except that as soon as I tried to stand, my knee finally gave up the fight completely. It buckled under my weight. The phone dropped from my hand. And watching it tumble over the ground, skittering to a stop just out of my reach, was the final thing that broke me.

As I stared it I felt powerless.

Defeated.

Hot tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

Then the king knelt beside me and took me into his arms.

“I want to help you.” His gaze commanded mine, and as I met it the desire that pulsed through him was obvious and powerful—something that seemed to catch him off guard. Which didn’t happen to him very often, judging by the way his next words came breathless and quick: “I believe I *need* to help you. So please...”

The pressure in my chest this time made all of the ones before it seem weak in comparison.

That same rose-colored light from before was back, but it didn’t burn this man the way it had burned Bryce.

It only made that desire rippling through him all the more powerful, causing the skin of his forearms to rise in little bumps and his fingers to dig a little deeper into their grip on me.

I could feel that same intense feeling stirring in me.

It made no sense, but my mouth was suddenly unbearably dry, and all I wanted to do was drink him in and let him cure me of my thirst.

We can heal you.

There was more wrong with me than just my busted knee, and I knew it. And jumping into some hole wasn't going to cure me, no matter where it might have led to.

But I couldn't deny this strange desire I had to follow the man holding me—wherever he might have been going.

The others interrupted us, dragging Bryce along with them, and I finally managed to look away from the king's powerful gaze.

My eyes darted toward the sinkhole without much thought.

"She's too cowardly to jump," Bryce said. "I've managed to keep her for nearly a decade now, and I will keep her for decades more. Now, *leave us* before I decide to make our little meeting here turn truly ugly and painful for you."

I hadn't wanted to see him ever again, but I couldn't keep myself from glaring his direction.

He glared right back. Triumphantly—the same way he always looked at me after he knew he'd beaten me back into submission, after winning nearly all of our many arguments with his guilt trips and manipulations.

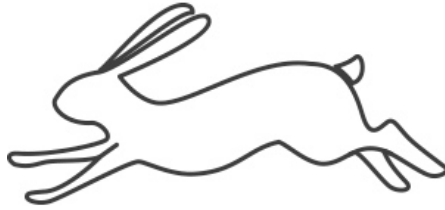
Whatever that light between myself and the king had been, it seemed to have given me strength.

I got to my feet.

I limped to the sinkhole.

And, still mostly convinced this was a dream— and that I would *not* be ordered around in my own dreams, of all places—I jumped.

CHAPTER 3



In Which Some Things Fall, And Some Questions Arise

I was falling for approximately thirty seconds before it all began to feel very, very real, and I realized that I didn't seem to be waking up.

And then it occurred to me that jumping into a weird, giant hole of almost certain death to spite one's ex-fiance was childish at best, and extraordinarily dumb at worst.

I lost track of how long I fell for.

At first, there was nothing but darkness.

But soon I began to catch glimpses of white light slicing through the shadows. Or was I hallucinating? Probably the latter, I thought, because soon some of the light was taking shape and forming objects. Simple shapes at first—spheres and cylinders and pyramids. Then the beams of it twisted, refracted into more intricate things: flowers and birds and teacups; books and clocks, and what I swear looked like a striped cat with cunning eyes that was just watching me fall down, down, down as it lazily swished its tail.

More and more colors were bleeding into the scene. Blues and purples, then reds and oranges, then greens and some shades that were so beautiful and brilliant that I couldn't even think of what to properly call them.

The kaleidoscope of objects whirled around me as I fell faster and faster.

I fell past more of those light-formed objects, and then... windows. Glass pane after glass pane that allowed me a quick glimpse at a world on

the other side of it—

A forest of twisting purple trees.

A flash of a castle that appeared to be encased in ice.

An ocean with black water.

A flicker of a colorful palace bathed in silvery moonlight.

A desert with red, rolling dunes of staggering size.

Yet another imposing mansion, this one burning with the light of hundreds of torches set against its face.

I whooshed past them all so quickly that it took me a moment to realize that they all had something in common: a shadow edging over them, oozing down and threatening to engulf my view.

Was it simply some odd filth on those glass panes I was looking through?

“Somehow I don’t think so,” I said to the most-recently formed object in the air around me: a little dog that was freefalling right along with me, its ears and tail and limbs floating, splaying out in a way that was almost comical.

Unsurprisingly, it neither agreed nor argued with me.

Oh great—I’m talking to myself now.

“I’ve officially lost it,” I muttered.

The dog blinked its eyes.

I was, if it was possible, even more weirded out by this, and I unsuccessfully tried to spin myself around in mid-freefall so I could get away from the creature.

Then I suddenly heard that familiar-by-this-point tinkling of bells in my head, and everything lurched to a stop—except for me.

My fall was slowing, but not quickly enough.

I was hurtling toward ground that was very suddenly *there*, and that appeared to be carpeted in snarled vines covered in thorns.

I screamed.

No sound came out.

The only thing I emitted was a soft red-colored light that wrapped around my body. It stretched upward, back toward Earth, slowing me further as it did.

I still slammed down with an impressive amount of force.

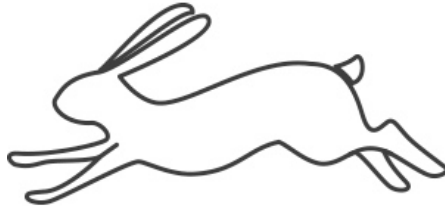
The thorny vines slowed me the rest of the way, cutting through my clothing and tearing bloody streak after bloody streak across my skin until

I finally spilled out of them and rolled onto actual, solid ground.

I saw something crawling between the thorns as I tumbled to a stop—a figure made of shadows, watching me.

The pain lasted only an instant after that, and then I was unconscious.

CHAPTER 4



In Which There's Some Confusion, Some Drugs, and Way Too Much Tea

Someone was gently caressing my cheek.

My eyes were closed. I felt my lips moving—mumbling something. Telling whoever was touching me not to stop, I hoped, because their touch was warm and sent calmness and certainty radiating through me. It distracted from the pain that I knew was burning, stabbing more parts of my body than I could reliably count just then.

As expected, as soon as that touch went away, that pain and everything else I'd been successfully holding in immediately flooded in and started to overwhelm me.

The fight, the jump, the fall, the ground and the thorns rushing up, up, up—

"Come back," I heard myself say.

A soft chuckle was my answer, but then a moment later the hands were back as I'd requested, one dabbing a warm cloth across my collarbone, and when I sucked in a painful breath the other hand was immediately against my cheek once more.

I drifted off again.

I dreamed of the bottom of that hole that I'd jumped into. Of a man landing on his feet next to me, expertly avoiding the vines and thorns the way I hadn't managed to. He held a sword in one hand and what looked like a bleeding, pulsing heart in the other.

I heard him say my name.

I heard him laugh.

And then he lifted his head, and his familiar gaze burned into mine...

"He followed me here," I heard myself gasp. *"He's here—"*

"You're okay," said a soothing voice. "Wake up, Alex."

I blinked my eyes open.

"Professor?" I mumbled stupidly.

He wasn't wearing his glasses at the moment, but I still recognized his soft, appraising gaze; somehow it felt like I had stared into those pale blue eyes a million times before.

"Rhett, actually," he said, a corner of his mouth quirking.

He continued to work, dipping the cloth into a basin of water, wringing it out, and pressing it to all the scratches along my neck and face while I just gaped at him like a dummy.

"And I'm sorry," he added, "I'm trying to be as gentle as I can, but Emory is better at this sort of thing, to be honest— I was just filling in while he went to gather some ingredients to help with your pain."

"I...I'm okay," I said, despite the way that pain made the words slur together.

"You seem quite tough," Rhett agreed.

His eyes met mine for a moment, and I felt another jolt of that same assurance that was in his touch. I didn't *feel* very tough at the moment, playing the helpless patient to his doctoring, but it didn't matter; somehow just hearing him say it made me think it must have been true.

And it made that strangeness in my chest flutter to life once more.

No light appeared with it this time, but I had a feeling it was only because I felt so weak; I'd nearly died, and so had that light that had broken my fall, apparently.

"Where am I, exactly?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

I got the impression that maybe he hadn't even heard the question; he was too focused on his work of cleaning me up. I stared at him as he finished dabbing at a cut along my chin. Then he methodically inched my blanket a little further down until he'd almost entirely uncovered my breasts— far enough that I saw a flash of perky pink nipple.

And that was when I came to my senses and realized that the heavy quilt was the *only* thing covering those breasts.

"HEY!" I snatched the blanket to my bare chest and reeled backward, kicking wildly toward him.

“Calm down,” he said, just narrowly avoiding taking my foot to his face. “You shouldn’t exert yourself, we’ve only just—”

“And *you* shouldn’t take the clothes off of some woman you barely know! *Jesus freaking Christ* what is *wrong* with you?”

“Those clothes were shredded and covered in blood,” he replied, leaping out of my hitting range with a grace that seemed inhuman. He looked honestly surprised by my reaction to the fact that I was totally naked. “They were also in the way,” he insisted, still sounding as though he was reciting facts.

“Get *out!*” I shrieked.

“I—”

“What in the devil’s name is going on in there?” Emory’s voice was soon followed by his appearance, and he took one look at my frazzled appearance before starting to rush to my aid—only to stop at the furious tone of my voice.

“Do. Not. Come. Any. Closer.”

Caden’s head popped into the doorway a second later. “It sounds like it’s getting interesting,” he said with an impish grin.

My teeth clenched. “There’s nothing *interesting* about stealing a woman’s clothing!”

Caden’s grin widened. He sauntered in with an obvious intent that I was afraid to guess at, and the other two sighed in unison.

“Don’t make it worse,” Rhett warned him.

“*Please* don’t,” Emory seconded.

Caden sat down directly beside me before I could find the voice to protest again. He was close enough that the mattress sank in and tilted me toward him, causing our arms to brush. His gaze burned into mine. He was trouble in the shape of lean muscles and sun-darkened skin and perfect teeth, and it was obvious that he knew it.

We *both* knew it.

But that strange fluttering had started in my chest again, pulsing to life the second our skin had touched, and now I couldn’t seem to look away from him.

Seriously, *what the hell* was wrong with me?

“If it makes you feel any better,” he said, “we *all* saw you naked before we carried you here. So rest assured that we don’t feel like you’re playing favorites, at least.”

I was too mortified to speak.

“God damnit Caden,” Rhett said, massaging his temple and letting out another sigh.

“No one was looking at you like...well, like *that*,” Emory said in a rush. “We were just trying to determine how badly you were injured. You landed on a mammon vine, and their poison is very dangerous in large doses, so we were trying to tell how much of it might have broken through your skin—”

My thoughts spun circles while he rambled through all the different ways he’d treated me while I was asleep.

Meanwhile, Caden was still sitting next to me.

Still grinning.

“If you don’t get away from me in the next two seconds,” I said, “I am going to strangle you.”

“That could be hot,” he said.

I made a threatening move toward him, and with a wink he jumped back and landed delicately on the wooden floor. He moved with that strange surreal grace that Rhett possessed, giving me a little bow before walking away, laughing.

“You’re better off ignoring everything he says and does,” Rhett informed me once Caden appeared to be out of earshot.

In that moment I wished I could ignore *all* of them, and just go back to my normal—if admittedly somewhat miserable—life I once knew.

But that barely-settled pounding in my chest made me believe there would be no walking away from these men any time soon.

I did get a bit of relief a moment later, at least; it descended upon the room in the form of a short, plump lady with impossibly wrinkly, pinkish skin and hair the color of freshly-fallen snow.

“Out!” she commanded in a voice far too authoritative for her appearance. “The king ordered rest for the lady, and you all ain’t helpin’ with that. My own help’s comin’, so we don’t need you lot, so *go*.”

“But her medicine—” Emory began, pulling a jar from the bag at his hip.

“Thank you, Emory my sweet,” the woman said, snatching the jar from him, standing on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek, and then promptly shoving him at the door.

Emory gave me one last concerned look before obeying and disappearing into the hall.

“You too,” she said, leveling her gaze in Rhett’s direction next. I could barely make out her eyes amongst all the wrinkles, but thanks to her painted eyebrows, I could tell she was glaring. “Don’t make me get the broom.”

Rhett lifted his hands in surrender and then backed out the door as well.

The woman rounded toward me. She nimbly tossed the jar she’d taken from Emory up and down in her hand as she appraised me.

“None of them’s all bad,” she insisted. “But you get the group of ‘em together and they can be a heap full of trouble. Tense politics one moment, playin’ childish pranks on each other the next. These past days with all of ‘em in the palace have near ruined my complexion. All this stress...”

I smiled as politely as I could at her heavily wrinkled face; it reminded me of desert sand that had been battered by high winds.

What did it look like *before* it was ‘ruined’?

“King Adrian’s ready to kick ‘em out, I ’spect, but he won’t do it of course. Too much at stake for the whole of the empire I s’pose. Not that it’s my business to say.”

“Well, I needed a break myself, so thank you for kicking them out, um....”

“You can call me Mama Su,” she offered with a smile that fully parted her desert face. Then she turned and busied herself with that jar Emory had left, and I got my first real glimpse at the back of her.

Her hair was parted, the snow-white locks framing something that seemed impossible, even after all of the other nonsense I’d already seen.

“You....you have a....”

“Second face on the back o’ my head. Yes I know, child, don’t stare—s’rude, and she didn’t like it much when you do.”

As if to drive home the point, the second face—which was much smoother, with high cheekbones and wide violet eyes—turned its tiny nose up at me and let out an audible *hmph*.

“Sorry,” I stammered, averting my gaze.

“No worries,” said the front face of Mama Su. “You lived in Earth for quite a spell, correct? So I fancy this sorta thing seems a bit odd to ya.”

“Just a bit,” I agreed, swallowing hard.

“Dead useful it is, though, havin’ eyes in the backa my head—she’s the reason nothin’ gets past Mama Su, you know.”

“...I can imagine,” I replied, managing a small smile. I already liked this woman, even in spite of her oddness.

And I liked her even more when she clapped her hands and said, “Now, let’s get you properly dressed, eh?”

At the sound of her clap, a half-dozen maids filed into the room. They all looked relatively normal compared to Mama Su, although one of them did appear to be floating; it was hard to tell what was truly going on under the flowing skirts of iridescent cloth that covered her feet.

“I take it the clothes I came here in are damaged beyond repair?”

“Afraid so, dearie.”

I sighed. “Bye bye, awesome Manchester Orchestra t-shirt.”

“What’s that, now?”

“It’s a band. One of my favorites, and that was one of my favorite t-shirts.”

“Ah. Well, not ta worry—we’ll get ya somethin’ together here that’ll make you forget all about the clothes you lost.”

Two of the maids had carried in a basket full of what turned out to be dresses and different accessories, and most of the others set to work unpacking this basket—except for the smallest of those maids, who carried a tray laden with a tea pot, cups, sugar cubes, and little pots of spices.

“Tea?” she offered.

“Um, no thank you.”

She looked perplexed by this, like no one around here ever turned down tea. But personally, I didn’t want it unless it was spiked with Jack Daniels—and it definitely didn’t smell like it was.

One of the maids lifted a pale blue, delicate looking garment from the basket.

“That one,” I said, stepping closer to it—mostly to get away from the pushy tea girl, who looked like she was considering forcing some hot water and leaves and maybe a few sugar cubes down my throat.

The other maids all studied me for a moment.

Then they studied the dress.

Then they nodded approvingly, almost all at once, and stopped and set to work with the exact same, creepy, unified movements.

A few of them moved over me, stripping away my blanket and measuring my body, pressing and scrubbing at my skin. I realized then that there was no pain; I hadn't felt *any* pain, actually, since that rush of it I'd felt when I first woke up.

"I feel like this should hurt more," I said, holding out my arms to Mama Su. I could still see the scars that the demon vines had torn into them, clear and bright red against my pale skin. But they didn't hurt. My knee didn't either, somehow.

"Mm?" she replied, pulling a cup of tea away from her lips. "Oh, that Emory did some work on ya while you snoozed away," she reminded me. "I 'magine it's starting' to have an effect, s'all. Been three days, after all."

"Three *days*?"

"Mmhm. But we did what we could with you while ya slept, an' this medicine he wanted ya to take should help finish the job. He's quite the doctor, idn't he?"

I thought of the worried look he'd given me before getting booted from the room, and the way Rhett had been gently trying to help him clean my wounds.

I felt a tiny bit guilty.

Maybe they *had* only been trying to help me.

But I still didn't like the idea of being so exposed around them, even if something inside of me did seem inexplicably drawn toward them.

I didn't like being that exposed around *anyone*; just thinking about it made my throat feel tight and my stomach twist.

I was uncomfortable in my nakedness even now that it was just us women, and I insisted on privacy once they tossed me into a bath.

A few of the maids made the initial alterations on my chosen dress while I sank into the bliss of lavender-scented water and bubbles thick enough to cover me and my scars.

It was clear that some effort had been made to clean me up before now, but there was still enough dried blood and dirt on my skin to turn the water an unpleasant shade of brown. I was considering draining that water when a small, white, dragon-like bird fluttered in and perched itself on the tray next to the freestanding tub. It puffed up its scaly chest and its pink eyes bulged out in a way that was both disturbing and somewhat menacing.

It dove straight into my bath.

I held back a shriek as it twirled through the dirty water, its body puffing in and out—gorging itself on the water and then spitting it back out again.

After two or three minutes of this, the water was clear once more, and the bird had turned from white to grey. It perched once more on the tray, picking at its scales with its curved beak and looking incredibly pleased with itself.

“Dear god,” I whispered to myself. “What kind of drugs am I on?”

Mama Su appeared just long enough to pat the strange bird on the head, and to place a small cup of Emory’s latest medicine on the tub’s ledge, and then she left me alone again after assuring me that my dress was going to be a *right beauty of a choice*. The bird fluttered after her.

The words ‘*Drink Me*’ were etched into the silver cup she’d left, swooshed across it in a fancy font.

I rolled my eyes at them.

“Never mind the fact that it might be more poison, for all I know,” I muttered, sinking deeper into the water and letting my dirty hair fan out around me.

But I couldn’t take my eyes off of the cup.

If I could trust any of them based on first impressions, I think it would have been Emory—and he *had* taken away most of my pain already, however he’d done it...

I considered the cup for another minute or two before reaching for it.

I sipped its contents slowly. It wasn’t Jack Daniels, but it did send a pleasant tingling over my scalp, and it made me lose track of my fears and the time and the impossibility of everything that was happening.

Minutes later, several trays were brought in—by maids who dutifully averted their eyes—and they were propped up beside the bath. Food came a minute later. Tons of gorgeous, strange food. Cakes in bold neon colors. Cheeses carved into intricate flower shapes and sprinkled with a powdery substance. A bowl of some sort of pale green pudding.

I couldn’t deny that I was starving, so I grabbed the most innocuous looking piece I saw—a flatbread smeared with a mustard-colored sauce—which ended up tasting a bit like Hawaiian pizza.

Which was fine by me, because I was one of *those* people who understood that pineapple on pizza was a great idea, and I was willing to fight anyone who tried to convince me otherwise.

After the ‘pizza’, I ate entirely too many cream puffs that were practically orgasm-inducing, and then I laid my head back against the tub and closed my eyes.

Soon after, my gorged self was being helped out of the water and wrapped in fluffy towels, and it all officially began to feel more like a dream instead of a nightmare.

Then they showed me the dress, and I think I might have actually let out a dreamy sort of sigh.

“Let’s get ‘er in it, then,” Mama Su said, hardly containing the excitement in her voice. That strange bird from my bath was perched on her shoulder, and it seemed to agree with her plan, judging by the way it chirped and flapped its wings.

It had been a spur-of-the-moment choice, but once they pulled the dress over my head and finished fastening the buttons that ran up the back seam, there was no doubt in my mind that it was the *correct* choice.

I saw only a slightly distorted reflection of it in the silver border of the massive wardrobe against the far wall, but it was enough to know that the wedding dress that I’d been so dismayed about leaving behind was *hideous* compared to this masterpiece.

I turned in search of a better mirror, but Mama Su clucked her tongue at me.

“Gotta add some finishin’ touches before we let ya see the full deal,” she said.

I stood, obedient and a bit sleepy, as they dried my hair, brushed it into soft waves, and weaved some sort of white flower that resembled daisies through it. A half-dozen hands worked on my makeup next, painting my lips red and using a puff to slap powder rather messily onto my face and neck.

“That’ll do,” Mama Su said after a few minutes, and the other maids bowed their heads and backed away as she led me to a mirror in the corner, which was covered by a thick sheet.

She yanked the sheet off, and I gasped.

The dress was unimaginably soft, silky, and it clung to the curves of my body in all the right, flattering ways. The delicate blue was a perfect compliment to my eyes, making them appear a million times brighter than their usual dark, blueish grey. A low-sweeping neckline worked with the laced bodice to give me at least an illusion of cleavage, which was further

accented by a heart-pendant necklace that hung into it. Wave after wave of organza cascaded down the bottom half of the dress in artfully designed ruffles; when I spun at Mama Su's insistence, the thin, silky material shimmered in the lamplight.

"We could shine a bit more light on you, how 'bout?" she suggested warmly.

She waved her hand toward the window, and two of the other maids scurried over and drew back the plush, plum-colored curtains. Light flooded in, and suddenly I barely recognized myself.

I looked like some sort of fairytale princess.

My hands reached for my face, just to make sure it wasn't an illusion.

Then I finally managed to blink, and to stop staring at myself long enough to see the reflection of the window behind me.

I turned and slowly made my way toward that floor-to-ceiling window.

As I reached it, I had to place my hand against the glass to help keep my balance.

Outside, a labyrinth of hedges stretched in one direction, while a forest of silver-white trees extended in the other. A river with amethyst water wound its way through them both, the gentle waves of its current glistening in the moonlight.

Was this a dream?

A drug trip?

What had I jumped into, really?

"Where *am* I, exactly?" I asked again.

"*Exactly?* Well, let's see now...That'd be the third floor of the Sun Palace, second room on the right, fourth window from the door, atop a rug given to 'is Majesty by the Lord and Lady De la Torre. Oh, and in the former Kingdom of Hearts, now known as the Sun Kingdom. An all o' *that* is, o' course, in our beloved empire of Wonderland."

"Wonderland?" I breathed.

She nodded, smiling her desert-parting smile.

"As in the one Alice found?"

"Ah, so ya *do* know somethin' of your history after all."

I looked away from the window. "My history? No—it isn't my *history*. It's a story I read as I child. A story full of nonsense and rhymes and weird things that made no sense. I..."

“Huh. So there is some Earth literature worth readin’ I s’pose.” She shrugged, and turned to greet the same young maid that had been carrying the same tea tray around earlier.

“Tea?” the maid offered, holding that tray up to me again.

“I...No thank you.”

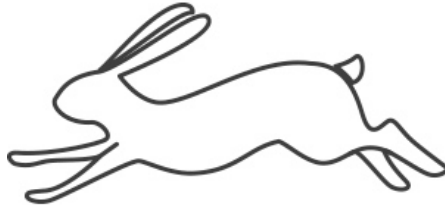
Another look of bewilderment from her.

What is it with these people and tea?

I bit down this question in favor of all the others I had—but in the end, none of my questions were answered, because someone by the door cleared their throat and announced: “His Royal Majesty, King Adrian.”

And the entire room, the maids and the strange birds alike, bowed at the man who walked into the room—the same man who had first crawled out of that hole back on Earth.

CHAPTER 5



In Which Things Begin to Look Impossible

Everyone was still bowing to Adrian almost a minute later.

I felt like maybe I should do the same—but I decided I would rather stare at him instead. Maybe that little defiance was what caused the flash of dark amusement in his grey eyes before he dismissed the maids and then crossed the room to my side.

My heart pounded as he took my hand and swept a kiss across it.

He wore an *actual* crown now—a golden circlet with white jewels in the shape of hearts.

It fit him as perfectly as I imagined it would.

“So, you really *are* a king.”

“All of us are.”

“All of you?”

“Myself, Emory, Rhett, Caden.” He clasped his hands together behind his back and stared out the window behind me. I couldn’t help but notice the way the movement stretched the white silk shirt over his chest and accented the well-defined muscles there.

“Four kings...” I thought aloud. “I don’t remember that in any of the stories I’ve ever read about this place.”

“My great-grandfather was the King of Hearts. Emory’s was the King of Diamonds. Rhett’s—Clubs, and Caden’s ancestor was the Spade King.”

“But this is the Sun Palace?”

“Sun, Frost, Fire, and Moon—those are the current names of the Kingdoms of Heart, Diamond, Clubs, and Spades, respectively.”

“Were you just trying to confuse people by adding extra names?”

He nodded, patient and serious and seemingly unaware that my question was mostly a knee-jerk sarcastic response. “There were a lot of reasons for the change, but we could say that; Wonderland’s residents have always thrived on confusion and ridiculous mix-ups.”

“So this is *your* palace?”

“Yes. Which is why the others aren’t parading about as obvious kings; it would be in bad taste for them to wear their own crowns here.”

“Do kings normally travel in packs?”

He didn’t smile at the attempt at humor; I got the feeling that he wasn’t one who was quick to smile at anything.

“They’re here because their own kingdoms are not safe anymore,” he said.

“Why not?”

He frowned, hesitated a moment before glancing back at me. “There is a shadow overtaking our empire. A man known as the Nightmarcher has been gathering forces for some time now; I’m afraid we didn’t take him as seriously as we should have earlier, and now we are paying the price for it.

“Those three other kingdoms—Moon, Fire, and Frost— are covered in a darkness wrought by his magic. We refer to it as *the Sweeping Night*, and we’ve found no way of lifting it thus far. The kingdoms’ citizens are turning to stone in some cases, outright dying in others, and the same is happening to the plants and animals—and it’s spreading. My kingdom is the last stronghold against this darkness, but I don’t know how much longer we can withstand it.”

I looked back at the breathtaking landscape outside my window.

The thought of it all turning to darkness and stone was enough to make me want to cry.

It was weird, because it wasn’t as though I’d had much time to get attached to this place. But somehow it still felt like it was a part of me—like if it died, I was going to go with it.

Which is so *not* a feeling that I signed up for.

“Why did you tell me to jump?” I asked quietly. “Why wouldn’t you tell me what I was jumping into? First a pile of thorns, and now this—”

“Have you been healed?”

“Physically, yes, but I...”

“Did you rest well?”

“Well enough, I guess,” I said, stiffly.

“Good.”

He was staring at me in the same way he had back on Earth, his stone-colored eyes full of an authority and sudden, unabashed desire that made it impossible to look away, no matter how upset I might have been at him and the situation I’d found myself in.

“You look beautiful, by the way,” he said.

The compliment caught me off guard.

So did the fluttering of light that it caused around my chest.

I thought—was sort of hoping at this point, really—that I’d imagined that light, but he was staring at it too.

“My eyes are up here, buddy,” I muttered.

“I’m not staring at your breasts, lovely as they are,” he said flatly.

“And I’m quite certain you already knew that.”

I hugged my arms against my chest. It did little to suppress the glow.

“Why does this keep happening?”

“For the same reason I insisted you come back into this world with us. Because it seems that Earth is not—and never was—your true home.”

I laughed.

He didn’t.

He looked as infuriatingly solemn as ever.

“I was born on Earth. I have the birth certificate to prove it!”

“Just because you were born in a place does not mean it is where you were meant to be,” he said, mirroring me and folding his arms across his chest. “And your mother was born here.”

“She would have told me,” I insisted, shaking my head.

“She very likely did. Maybe not directly, but perhaps through stories, and maybe with the intent of telling you the whole truth once you were old enough—”

“You’re wrong.”

“—but if our theory is correct, that sorry excuse for a man you’ve been living with for the past nine years likely altered your mind and made you forget anything she might have said. He was a Shade—a manifestation of the Nightmarcher himself that was sent to Earth, presumably to keep you and the power you possess from returning to Wonderland. He may have been responsible for your mother’s death as well, although that’s more pure speculation than the rest.”

I was speechless.

I didn't *want* it to make sense.

But I had moved in with Bryce right after my mother and father had been in that fatal car accident. The shock of the accident had supposedly induced amnesia in me, so most memories of my parents disappeared and they never resurfaced. So Bryce had supported me, helped rescue me from that trauma.

Or so I'd thought.

I'd had those vivid dreams the entire year after my parent's death—like drug trips, really. And now I was clearly remembering the day Bryce insisted I start taking that medication to quell my depression and anxieties—my curiosities—about said dreams. About my past, my family, my loss...

That *bastard*.

"I dreamed of him earlier," I whispered. "I dreamed he was *here*. That he'd followed me, and he had a sword and a heart in his hand..."

I was shaking all over again just thinking about it.

And just as he'd done when I felt close to breaking down on Earth, the king took me into his arms and held me until I stopped trembling, until my fear started to melt away and desire flooded the spaces it had left.

It felt strange to go so quickly from raging hatred of Bryce to loving the touch of another man.

Like I wasn't, *couldn't be*, ready for this.

But it was different in King Adrian's arms.

His strength was so effortless that it didn't feel like the desperate attempt to possess me the way Bryce's touch always had.

I knew I couldn't have broken free from this king if he decided he wanted to keep me, but something about his otherworldly power made me feel...safe. Like nothing else could touch me as long as his fingers were against my skin, as long as his touch kept building that light in my chest, engulfing us in warmth and a strange, simmering power.

He leaned back after a moment so he could look into my eyes.

His steely, serious gaze had softened a bit.

"I can't promise you that you won't see him again," he said. "But I can promise you that as long as I am breathing, he will not hurt you again. I will do anything—*everything*—to make sure of that." His fingers traced my jaw, rested at my chin and gently tilted my face upward.

A shiver coursed through me, all the way from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

Is he going to kiss me?

No; his lips paused several inches away from mine, and he quietly said, “And you have your own strength, besides; the fact that you managed to find a way to run from him is nothing short of astounding, really. Don’t forget that.”

He canted his head to the side, as if he simply wanted to study me and that strength a little more.

“I’m not sure how I managed it,” I said, stammering a bit under his powerful gaze, “but a week or so ago I stopped taking the pills he was drugging me with.”

“Interesting.”

“Is it?”

“The other three kings arrived almost exactly a week ago, in Earth’s time.”

“You think that helped me somehow?”

“I think...” he replied after a moment of thought. “That we still have a lot of questions left to answer. But one thing is certain: You are meant to be here. We had given up hope that someone like you even existed, much less that we might find a way to bring you back home...”

I still wasn’t convinced.

“But I can’t stop thinking about Earth,” I said. “I had a life there, you know, and outside of Bryce it wasn’t *entirely* miserable. I had a job I didn’t hate, a best friend who is probably worried *sick* about me at this point—”

“None of that matters now.”

“Excuse me?”

His expression hardened again. “I thought I made it clear that this empire is facing a war against the Nightmarcher. We are on the brink of destruction, Alexandra, and every minute that passes brings it closer to us.”

“It isn’t *my* em—”

“Yes it is.” He took several deep breaths, but his voice was still full of just barely suppressed anger when he added, “I am sorry for the way your mind has been poisoned, for the way the legacy that belongs to you was stolen. But it doesn’t change the fact that I need you. This light between us

is proof of the potential power we could yield—power that might be the only thing that can save Wonderland.”

“So you’re holding me hostage,” I said, disgusted.

I couldn’t believe I’d just been thrilled at the thought of kissing this jerk, or that I’d ever wanted to follow him anywhere.

I’d apparently jumped from one hell into another.

“I will take you in whatever way necessary,” he said evenly, “but I *intended* to make you my queen, not my slave.”

“Oh, *fantastic* then.” I jerked the rest of the way out of his embrace. “But for the record, that’s a really shitty way to propose to a girl.”

He glared at me, and I glared right back.

That light around us faded further and further, and then it finally disappeared altogether.

“Go away,” I said, turning away. “I want to be alone.”

It was obvious he wasn’t used to being ordered around in his own palace. I fought the urge to wither underneath the fire that my words brought to his eyes, and I held my breath until it smoldered out.

“Fine,” he said. “Take some time to think about what I’ve said.”

“I don’t need to think. I already know how I feel about being held hostage—because I dealt with it for the past nine years, remember?”

“This is not the same.” He sounded somewhat hurt by the accusation, but he averted his eyes before I could clearly see any pain.

“Go away,” I said again.

He left.

Mama Su fluttered in a moment later. “Oh dear,” she hummed, “judgin’ by the look on the king’s face, I’d say your meetin’ didn’t go particularly well?”

My teeth clenched. “He can’t expect me to just agree to be his *queen*, to help him save an entire empire I only just discovered an hour ago. Jesus. Does he understand how feelings and people work? Like at all?”

“Not really, no.” She sighed a worldly, knowing sort of sigh, and busied herself with absently folding clothing and wiping down the already spotless furniture for a few minutes before she said, “But go easy on ‘im, eh? He’s been carrying that entire empire for some time now. An’ he was so eager for you ta heal, ta wake up...maybe he jus’ got ahead o’ himself is all.”

I tried to find a way to match my feelings to the sympathetic tone of her voice, but in the end all I wanted to do was fling myself onto the nearby chaise and cry a good, angry cry.

So that's what I did.

"I just want to go home," I sniffed as Mama Su placed a hand on my back.

"None of that now," she said, pulling a handkerchief from the front of the smock she wore and wiping away my tears.

"Even if I agreed to stay, what sort of power could I possibly possess? I barely managed to escape a Shade of this Nightmarcher person—how could I honestly face the true thing, if he's really already overtaken three entire kingdoms?"

"Sit up, child."

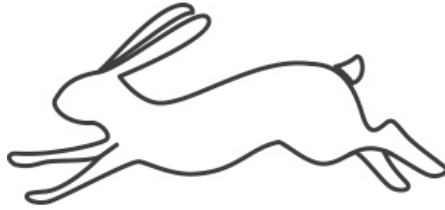
I obeyed.

"It's not all bad, ya hear me?"

"It's all feeling rather *impossible*," I couldn't help but utter.

She chuckled softly, wiping a few lingering tears away. "Trust me m'dear, you spend a few more days here, an' you'll begin to believe that nothing much is really *impossible*. Jus' you wait and see."

CHAPTER 6



In Which I Try to Explain that I'm a Useless Dog Person, and Literally Nobody Listens to Me

For the second time this week, I'd made up my mind about running away.

I couldn't stay here.

I appreciated Mama Su's attempts to cheer me up, and I would miss her, but she was wrong: this was impossible and I was a wreck enough already, and I'd been running away from Bryce so I could focus on putting my *own* life back together—I didn't think I had it in me to try to save this weird world at the same time.

I rehearsed my excuses as I followed the winding corridor toward the meeting room where I was told the kings of Wonderland would be.

Heads turned and followed me as I walked. I was still wearing that amazing blue dress, and it didn't go unnoticed. People whispered. Things I thought were statues turned to watch me. A few of the others I passed were like Mama Su, with literal eyes in the back of their heads, and they spun circles long after I was past them, both faces vying for a glimpse of the woman who had jumped into their world.

I tried to hold my chin up and act like I didn't mind if they stared.

If I stayed and became a queen, it would be like this all of the time.

All the more reason to run—I didn't like being the center of attention.

Unfortunately, that was exactly what I became once I reached the kings.

They had been arguing; I'd heard it as I approached. But as soon as the guard at the door let me in, all four of them fell silent. Three sets of

eyes fixed on me. Adrian sat at the head of the long glass-topped table, staring intently at the tea cup in his hand.

Emory was the first to speak—just a single, appreciative: “Wow.”

Something painful clawed at my heart at the thought of leaving him behind.

How stupid.

I barely knew him. Or Rhett, or Caden—and I shouldn’t have cared about the way they were staring at me with nearly identical looks of admiration. Those looks shouldn’t have made me blush, or stirred anything inside of me at all. They shouldn’t have been making my hands shake the way they were.

Because I wasn’t going to stay for them.

I couldn’t.

“I want to go home,” I said, narrowing my eyes at Adrian.

“Earth isn’t your true home,” he said, still not looking at me. “I told you that.”

“Well I don’t want to stay here and be your queen!”

The others exchanged confused glances, and uncomfortable silence settled for a moment.

Caden interrupted it. “*Your* queen? What’s she talking about Adrian? What did you say to her earlier?”

Adrian sighed. “I told her the truth. That we suspected that the light she possessed might be proof of the power we need to save our kingdoms. And the light is clearly the most powerful when I connect to her, so it only made sense to—”

“Seriously?” Caden interrupted.

Emory shuffled uncomfortably.

“That isn’t what we agreed on,” Rhett said, frowning.

Silence.

Infuriating silence.

“Oh, so you *all* had agreements about me?” I snapped. “Did you plan on consulting with me about them? Or were all four of you just planning to fucking surprise propose to me in turn?”

“You *proposed* to her?”

“And she shot your ass down, didn’t she?” Caden laughed. “That’s brilliant. That’s the best thing I’ve heard all day—seriously.”

“This conversation is turning unproductive,” Adrian growled.

“Look at him trying to change the subject,” Caden said, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Would you like for me to banish you from my sight and kingdom?”

“I second that particular motion,” Rhett coughed.

“Back to the more important matter,” Emory said pointedly. “You aren’t the only one who’s caused her power to stir, Adrian. I believe it’s reacted to all of us. Your reaction might be the strongest, but that’s probably because you’re the one whose own power remains the least diluted by the Sweeping Night.”

I frowned at Emory.

This was definitely *not* turning into the clean break I’d been hoping for.

This was just getting more and more complicated and harder to walk away from.

Adrian looked a bit disgruntled and lost in thought for a moment—as if trying, and failing, to find a way to refute Emory’s point. Finally, he sighed and said, “It still stands to reason that the Sun Kingdom should receive the most protection, until it is fully stabilized. Because if *it* falls, then everything ends.”

“Please don’t act as though we haven’t sacrificed our own resources to help stabilize this kingdom,” Rhett said, an edge appearing in his voice for the first time since we’d met.

Emory’s tone was sharper—more kinglike—as well as he added, “They were mostly Frost soldiers who fell at the most recent battle at the edge of the darkness, if I’m not mistaken.”

“No one suggested you hadn’t made sacrifices.”

“And yet you would try to command our greatest chance at survival, as if you’ve earned the sole right to it,” Rhett said drolly.

“Hi, hello?” I called, waving my hand. “I’m still here you know. The one you’re talking about like she’s a weapon of mass destruction that you can *command*?”

“Do you have a solution to propose?” Rhett asked, almost hopefully. Emory’s eyes were shining with the same sort of hope, and even Caden had stopped laughing long enough to glance my way with what appeared to be a thoughtful expression—at least for him.

I could finish running away, I thought. And you could all lose and everyone would be equal then, right?

I sighed.

If only I was that damn heartless.

“Not really,” I admitted, and then I simply told them the truth: “But for what it’s worth, I doubt I’m strong enough to even save *one* kingdom so, you know, no need to fight over me or whatever. I can be equally useless to all of you.”

“Nonsense,” Adrian said.

“We really *don’t* know the full extent of her power, though,” Emory pointed out. A few more moments of silent deliberation passed, and then he said, “So I think we need to summon *Her*.”

Adrian and Rhett visibly tensed.

“Could we fucking not?” Caden groaned.

“Who is *Her*?” I asked.

“An old friend of Wonderland’s kings and queens.”

“*Friend* is a bit of a stretch,” Rhett said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“They don’t like her because she tends to knock them all down a peg or two—or six—whenever she visits,” Emory said with a sly smile at me. “But I get on with her okay,” he added with a shrug.

“You get along with everyone, because you’re a notorious suck-up,” Caden said.

“You should take notes,” Adrian suggested.

“No thank you.”

“Watch carefully,” Emory said to me, ignoring the others as he plucked that pin of the winged lion from his jacket. He tossed it into the air. Closed his eyes and snapped his fingers, and the pin fell back to table and scattered into dozens of tiny black diamonds.

The lights along the walls zipped out, one by one.

The air filled with the sound of buzzing bees.

“Here we go,” Caden sighed.

The lights flickered back into their sconces. A chill wind blew from somewhere, pulling the flames in those sconces this way and that.

My eyes were drawn to the reflection of those flickering lights—to a large, ornate mirror that took up nearly an entire wall of the room. As I watched, the surface of that mirror began to move like water, and then circles were spreading from its center—like someone had tossed a stone there.

The water parted.

And a woman stepped out.

She wore a dress the color of overcast sky. Her hair reminded me of the sun burning around clouds, grayish-white with ends dipped in bold orange, and she wore so many charms around her neck and wrists that their jangling drowned out all other noises when she walked. With the weight of them all I'm not sure how she managed to walk—no, *float*, really—over to the table and slam her hands down against the glass.

"Hello boys," she said, smiling a slightly gap-toothed smile at each of the kings in turn.

Then her sky-blue eyes found me.

"Oh! And hello *girl*."

She pushed away from the table and circled me like a lioness that had managed to pick the weakest zebra out of the herd.

"A Kincade, no doubt. How... *interesting*."

"That's the only reason we called you here," Adrian said.

"Do please shut your royal mouth," she laughed, waving a dismissive hand at him without taking her eyes off of me. "I know why I was summoned." She sounded sure enough of this last part, but she still took her time studying me, crossing her arms across her chest, propping her chin on a fist and staring until I finally couldn't help but speak.

"Um, what are you looking for, exactly?"

She arched an eyebrow that appeared to have been painted on with maroon ink. "Impatience still runs strong in your family, I see."

"In her defense," Caden drawled, "Five minute pauses in conversations are weird."

"I have an endless number of five minute pauses to spare, King of Spades—or *of the Moon*, or whatever you may be calling yourself now," she said, rounding on him.

"Well we may not have such limitless time," Rhett said.

"May not indeed," she said, smiling wide enough to show every last one of her brilliantly white teeth. Then she looked back at me and said, "I was here before Wonderland began, and I shall be here after it ends. If it ends. However it ends. So it doesn't matter so much to *me* how long this takes. I wonder if it matters to you?"

I could feel the gaze of each of the kings settling on me.

I kept my eyes on Lady Middy.

“I just want to know what this strange stirring inside of me is. And the light that sometimes comes with it—a *true* explanation of both would be great.”

“Is that all you want from me?”

“I...um, yes?”

“Very well then.” She rested her chin lightly on a propped up fist. “The light inside you comes from the *Heartstone*. It is the most powerful artifact Wonderland has ever known, and it was created by your great-grandmother as a gift that was meant to be shared between the then-rulers of Wonderland.

“There were four rulers back then, and she loved them all, and they reigned over a unified land—but eventually their squabbles over her and the Heartstone’s power caused it to split into four weaker pieces. Wonderland followed suit, splitting into the four weaker kingdoms that it is today. The rulers went their own separate ways, hoarding their respective pieces in their respective palaces. The core of the stone, meanwhile, remained in your great-grandmother Alice, and then in her daughter Alice, and so on and so forth all the way down to...well, *you*.”

I absently placed my hand over my heart. “But what sort of power is it actually capable of?”

“Ah, now *that* will be an interesting thing to find out, won’t it?”

“And how do we go about finding out?” Adrian asked, impatiently.

Lady Midday tapped her fingers against her arm and bobbed her head back and forth, looking amused by the jangling sounds her earrings made while she took her sweet time about answering.

At least three or four minutes worth of sweet time.

Caden looked ready to leave. Rhett was rolling his eyes and muttering something under his breath. Even Emory looked annoyed, and Adrian was rising up from his chair when Lady Midday finally held up two fingers.

“Two things,” she said. “One: In the ruins of the castle where the first Alice and her kings once all resided together, the Crown of Five Jewels is resting. This crown has the power to draw the Heartstone out of you and into a physical object—into the jewel that will rest in the center of that crown. The crown has four other recesses waiting for four other jewels—one possessed by each of you dear kings.”

“I have no such jewel,” Adrian scoffed.

“Me either,” Rhett agreed.

Emory and Caden exchanged a glance and shook their heads.

“Let’s hope for Wonderland’s sake that you’re wrong, hm?” Lady Midday smiled mischievously. “And that they are still buried inside you, like the girl’s Heartstone is. The only trick lies in waking them up and drawing them out—but that’s the fun part.”

“Fun part?” I asked, warily.

“Mmhm. Because it will require them giving themselves fully to you, and you to them.” Her sky eyes twinkled. “A complete devotion, a love like the one your great-grandmother once shared with the original kings of Wonderland... Love, love, love is all you need— isn’t that a song where you come from?”

I stared at her.

She continued to smile her coy little smile.

“What exactly does that mean—a *complete* devotion?”

Lady Midday tutted, and lifted her gaze to the mirrored ceiling. “Oh, come now,” she mused. “Do children these days really have such limited imaginations? Is that an ailment of Earth-raised people in particular?”

“You’re not suggesting I would have to...you know, *be* with them? All four of them?”

“Well not necessarily all at once.” Her smile brightened. “Unless you’re into that sort of thing, I suppose.”

Caden laughed, while Emory averted his eyes and Rhett looked lost in thought, like he was calculating the logistics of this potential relationship.

Adrian said nothing, staring hard at Lady Midday as if trying to force her into confessing that this was all some sort of rude joke.

Myself, I was wondering if I had it in me to crawl back out of that hole I’d jumped into.

I mean, I’d only fallen what felt like...ten miles.

Ugh.

Okay, on second thought I probably needed a plan B.

“Assuming we managed this... *devotion*,” Adrian said, his voice smooth and calculating, “the power that we would awaken together...”

“The world is changed,” Lady Midday said. “So the power may have changed, but...If I had to guess, I would say that there is no darkness that could stand against the true queen of Wonderland when she puts that restored crown on her head and sits upon her throne, surrounded by all of her kings.”

“But are we really willing to go for this based on a *guess*?” Rhett asked, frowning.

Lady Middy ignored him. She was looking at me as though the conversation had only ever been between the two of us. Like she had just been waiting for this opportunity to declare me the true queen of Wonderland.

But I felt less like a queen and more like a dormouse.

“Mind you, I don’t just mean a complete *physical* devotion,” Lady Middy added. “Can’t neglect the hearts while you’re fighting this war; wouldn’t lend much power to the *Heartstone* if you did, obviously.”

Hearts.

Four different hearts.

Four different kings.

My balance swayed a bit. I felt like I was on some crazy carnival ride and all I wanted to do was shout at the operator to stop it so I could get off.

“I need a drink,” I mumbled.

“Tea?” Lady Middy offered, pulling one of the bracelets from her arm and changing it into a full teacup with a few precise flicks of her hand.

God, not this again.

I shook my head adamantly.

She looked skeptical, and waited a long pause for me to change my answer. When I didn’t, she finally just shrugged, and then proceeded to dump the tea out—right onto the glass table top.

The golden brown liquid cascaded down, and I gasped as it shifted into the shape of a crouching creature. Then that shape stood and shook itself, and droplets of tea flung from the body until I was left staring at a small cat with midnight fur, a smooshed face, and eyes the color of a harvest moon.

“*There* you are, you devilish thing,” Lady Middy said, hooking her hands beneath the cat’s front legs, scooping it up and pressing her nose to its.

The cat looked less than thrilled about the display of affection.

Lady Middy glanced from the bristling creature to me and said, “If not tea, then perhaps you would like to keep this cat?”

“Um...”

“He’s a Cheshire cat, you know—so he has a fabulous sense of direction. And I daresay you could use someone to give you direction on your upcoming journey.”

For some reason, I didn’t bother pointing out that I hadn’t agreed to any ‘journey’. I just said: “I’m more of a dog person.”

The cat twitched its tail and turned its moon eyes my way. “And I prefer brunettes myself,” it said drily. “But I would still be willing to tolerate *you* if it meant I could get away from *her*.”

“Rude,” Lady Midday huffed.

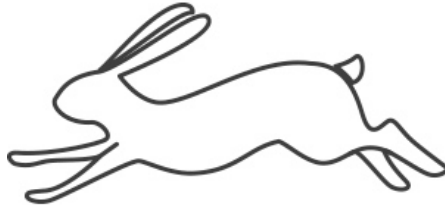
The fact that this cat was *speaking to me* wasn’t particularly surprising on top of everything else, but it was sort of the proverbial last crazy straw that broke the camel’s back.

“I’m going for a walk,” I declared, giving all of them my best I-fucking-dare-you-to-try-and-stop-me face.

I made it into the hallway outside before Lady Midday called after me in a singsong voice: “You cannot run away from your destiny, Alex.”

I kept walking.

CHAPTER 7



In Which There's Talk of White Rabbits and (Surprise!) More Tea

The labyrinth gardens that surrounded the Sun Palace were vast, and within just a few minutes of my defiant (or really just desperate) stomp away from Lady Midday and the kings, I was lost.

The hedges rose higher and higher the longer I walked, and they changed from lush, well-trimmed and flowering walls into an encasing of brownish green brambles.

I looked behind me, and the outline of the palace was so hazy that I wasn't convinced it wasn't a mirage.

How did I get so far away?

I looked ahead. More dead hedges and an eventual forest of black and silver trees loomed. A group of some sort of bat-like creatures circled overhead.

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a dark figure rounding a corner—the same shadowy person I'd seen when I first landed in this world, maybe?

A snap of twigs made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I spun around, but saw nothing, and when I turned once more to the path ahead, it had changed.

There was no shadowy figure in sight—but there *was* a towering wall of twisting vines and thorns and roses now blocking the way forward.

“Seriously?” I sighed.

I plopped down in the middle of my suddenly-dead-end path, drew my knees up and rested my chin on them. I was tired of walking, and fully

prepared to wait until someone discovered me, or I died, or I woke up and found myself back on Earth—whichever came first.

I looked up, and the Cheshire cat was suddenly there.

It padded along the top of the dried hedge, snapping more twigs as it came.

“Have you been following me this whole time?” I asked.

“I simply had nothing better to do,” the cat drawled, settling back on its haunches. He wasn’t exactly slim; I’m not sure how he didn’t sink right through the dried, frail hedge.

“Well did you happen to leave a trail of breadcrumbs so we could find our way back?”

“The mice would have eaten them.”

“You’re a cat. You could have taken care of the mice too.”

“That’s disgusting,” the cat said, further scrunching up its already scrunched face. “And most rodents in Wonderland are big enough to take care of *me*.”

I had a sudden urge to stand up again.

As I did, the cat leapt down from the hedge, wound its way through my legs a few times, and then stood facing me as it said, “You want to find your way back, do you?”

“Not really. But I’ve decided that maybe it’s a better alternative than dying out here after all.”

“You should keep running,” the cat suggested, a wild, toothy grin stretching across its entire face. “It’ll be fun.”

I frowned. “Somehow I doubt it.”

“Fine,” he said with a dismissive flick of his paw and a twitch of his tufted ears. “If you want to get back, just keep turning left, and eventually you’ll find that you’ve made it all right.”

“My left or your left?”

“Doesn’t matter, does it?”

“I would think that it *does*.”

“Just pick one and quit dawdling.”

Before I could argue further, he began to disappear—his feathered ears and paws first, and then his long tail, and then finally his flat face and that feral grin that had parted it.

Of course; I guess I should have been expecting him to disappear.

Earth’s stories about this world had gotten a few things right, at least.

“If you get me even more lost, you’ll pay,” I said to the empty air.

Disembodied laughter was my only answer.

Figuring I didn’t have anything to lose, I followed the cat’s advice. One left turn after another, and eventually the palace was large and clear again in front of me, just a few flowering walls of green separating us.

“The trick to this labyrinth is to have a fixed destination in mind,” said the cat, appearing suddenly beside me and scampering to keep up with my steps, “and then to follow one fixed path with a mad determination until you reach that destination.”

I thought of thanking him, but I wasn’t sure how thankful I felt to be back here facing those kings and everything.

I did try to make my tone friendlier than before as I asked, “Do you have a name? I mean besides *Cheshire Cat*?”

“Names just complicate things.”

“I’m going to call you Lewis,” I decided. “As in Lewis Carroll.”

He didn’t object or approve, just trotted silently alongside me.

Suddenly I heard what sounded like someone *thwacking* the crap out of something, and I slowed to a stop to try and pinpoint where it was coming from.

“What was that?” I asked my newly-named friend.

But there was no answer, because he was already gone again.

Some friend.

I pushed my way through the bushes on my own, following the sounds of *thumping* and *thwacking* until I came to a clearing edged in purple flowers.

Caden was there, a sword in his hands, and he was slicing and stabbing at a battered dummy in the center of the clearing.

He was also shirtless, and he looked better than he had any right to look, given what an asshole he’d already proven he could be.

I stared for an embarrassingly long time, trying to get my breathing to settle. Every time I thought I was close to catching that breath, Caden would spin or swing in a way that put every bit of his well-toned body on display, drawing my eyes to the multitude of tattoos on his light brown skin. I felt like I could have studied those inked designs forever and still not have memorized them all.

“You don’t have to watch from the bushes, you know,” he called suddenly. “Feels a bit stalkerish, really.”

My face burned. "I just...I didn't want to get in the way."

He turned to me, wiping the sweat from his brow and clearly flashing the black crescent moon tattoo on his forearm. "You could just admit you were stunned by my display of finesse and power."

"It's not really that impressive, considering your target," I countered.

He smirked, walked over and offered me his sword. "I can grab another sword if you'd like to take my opponent's place," he offered. "Might mess up your pretty dress though."

"We're not supposed to be opponents, remember?" I said, drily. "We're meant to be *lovers*."

He laughed in the same dry, humorless way I spoke. Then he busied himself with wiping down the sword and sheathing it.

I considered leaving, but something about his movements held me there.

He seemed tense. Lost in a thoughtfulness that I wouldn't have expected he was capable of.

And then he sat down on a nearby bench made of stone and said: "It's bullshit, what's being asked of you, you know."

I stared, waiting for him to crack his usual grin, to declare that he was only kidding, and to try to antagonize me some more.

He didn't.

So I sat down next to him.

"Yeah," I said. "It's complete bullshit. I was running away when you guys ran into me, you know? So I could start over by myself, not with four new guys, this is...This isn't going to happen. I'm just not the heroine you need."

He nodded, understanding, and for several moments we sat in a silence that was surprisingly comfortable.

"I get it," he finally said. His next words came slowly, cautiously. "I get it because I wasn't the king my people needed, either. I wasn't even supposed to be a king—my older brother was."

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

"Same thing that's happening to the rest of the kingdom now. The Sweeping Night—my parents and my brother were some of the first touched by it. They were on a mission to the south edge of our kingdom, to personally investigate a series of attacks there, and they came back from it with grey skin and eyes. They were all three dead within a week of their

return. So I became king, just like that. I tried to keep people from panicking, but hell, *I* was panicking worse than any of them.” He trailed off, shaking his head.

I stared at the ground, at a cluster of bright pink mushrooms next to my foot.

“And then, of course, I ran away when things got too desperate down there. I was in hiding for awhile before I came here at Adrian’s insistence.”

“You ran because your kingdom couldn’t afford to lose *all* of its rulers,” I insist. “I mean obviously, right?”

I could feel him staring at me, and I couldn’t help but let my gaze trail up to his. I was transfixed on his eyes for a moment, unable to look away from the unexpectedly complex emotions of pain and gratitude swimming in their dark blue depths.

“That’s what I tell myself most days,” he said, “but it’s nice to hear it from you, too.”

He looked away abruptly, and we were silent for a few minutes before I felt like I had to speak: “I wish I could help,” I said softly. “I really do. But...”

“I never expected you to help,” he said. He sounded like he meant it, too, but I still can’t help the guilt—and concern—washing over me.

“I’m not really sure what I was thinking, jumping into the middle of all this,” I think aloud. “At least the first Alice had an excuse, didn’t she? The white rabbit with his watch or whatever.”

“White rabbit?”

“Or maybe that part wasn’t true? But she was following it and fell in, supposedly.”

“Haven’t seen a white rabbit in a long time around here. Used to play cards with one when I was little, though.”

“You’re making that up.”

“You can never tell around here, can you?” he said, a hint of his usual grin returning.

“No,” I lamented.

“So maybe it’s true. Maybe his name was Jack.”

“You are so full of it.”

He only grinned wider, and continued his ridiculous story: “Maybe he used to have a certain tell when we were playing poker—like he would

tremble a lot, kind of like you're doing now. Are you part rabbit, maybe?"

"Must you point out the fact that I'm shaking every time I do it? You pointed it out on Earth, too."

"I'm doing it this time because I'm growing concerned about you, my sweet little Rabbit."

"Don't be," I said. "It's just something I can't help—anxiety is a bitch."

He studied me for a moment before getting to his feet and walking to where he'd placed his sword. Beside it, messily folded and carelessly tossed, was his shirt and the jacket he'd been wearing earlier. He grabbed the jacket, carried it back and draped it around me.

"What are you doing that for?"

"Feels better, doesn't it? Like a big ol' warm hug."

He had a point. It was a heavy material, and the shell of it was lined with soft fleece. The fact that it smelled like him—woody, with an undercurrent of different cooking spices—kept my heart racing a bit, but in a much more pleasant sort of way. I slipped my arms more fully into the sleeves and hugged them against my body.

I couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like if his strong arms were the ones curving against me instead.

I crushed the thought quickly, but we were still having an actual pleasant, civil conversation when a maid interrupted us a few minutes later, carrying a—wait for it—*tray of tea*.

"Tea?" she asked, almost hopefully.

"I'll pass," I said as Caden helped himself to a cup.

I waited until she was gone, and then I said, "If one more person asks me if I'd like a cup of tea, I think I might go mad."

Caden's grin reminded me of the Cheshire cat's. "Mad people fit in nicely in this place, so no worries there." He offered his cup to me. "Are you sure you don't want any?"

"I'm sure," I said flatly. "And I'm beginning to think I'm going to have to chuck a tea cup at someone's head to get my point across."

"So violent," he said, still smiling.

"I guess I just don't understand the fixation you all have on what's essentially leaf water."

He laughed. There was none of his usual sarcasm in it, and I found that the sound warmed me even more than his coat. I could have sat there

all night, listening to it.

No you can't, a tiny voice in my head reminded me, *because you were leaving him and all the others behind, remember?*

I got to my feet abruptly. "I should go. I need to talk to Adrian, and Lady Middyay."

"She's gone."

"Well I need to get her back."

"Good luck with that. She's kind of hit or miss when you try summoning her. Rather moody woman, that one."

"Well I'll find someone else who can help me get back to Earth, then."

"Right." The lingering magic of our pleasant last few minutes was gone, and his expression was a bit distant when he said, "But—by the way — Rhett was looking for you earlier. Told us all to send you his way if we saw you; almost forgot about it."

"Why does he want to see me?"

He shrugged. "I assume to give you a book or lecture you or something lame like that. You'll probably find him in the library. He basically lives there."

I bit my lower lip. Curiosity was gnawing at me, but I was afraid if I went to visit Rhett then I would just end up getting drawn further and further into this world that I wanted to leave.

I started to slip out of Caden's jacket, but he shook his head.

"Keep it," he insisted.

"What about you?"

"I look better with less clothes anyway," he said with his usual smirk.

"I wonder how you'd look wearing some modesty?"

"Dunno—never tried it. Not really my style." He got to his feet and turned to face me, maybe to give me one last look at that barely-clothed body, at the way those muscles formed a perfect V that disappeared under his low-slung pants.

I tried not to stare, but I couldn't help it. Especially not when he started to back away, giving me a careless little wave as he did, and I noticed something strange about the tattoo on his forearm. It had been a crescent moon above a serpentine dragon before, I was sure of it.

Now it was a spade above the shape of a rabbit.

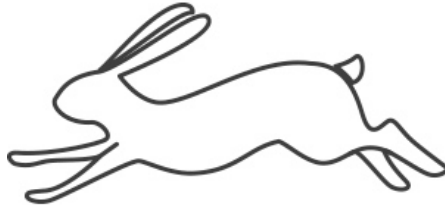
"Your tattoo changed. The one on your arm there."

“Of course it did—it’s *ostendo* ink,” he said, as if that explanation should have meant something to me.

It didn’t. But as I watched him walk away, I felt that stirring in my chest, and I looked down. Caden’s heavy jacket contained the faint glow—hiding the fact that the Heartstone was humming to life yet again.

I zipped and buttoned the jacket completely up before walking inside, but the warmth and pressure of it was impossible to ignore.

CHAPTER 8



In Which My Plans to Leave Get Derailed...Again.

The library was a full three stories, with a spiral staircase made of colorful stones winding through the middle of it all.

Soft orange light flickered across more bookshelves than I could count. There were almost as many paintings, dozens of them lining every inch of wall between the shelves and depicting mostly what looked like surrealist (or would it be *realist* in this world?) style paintings of Wonderland's landmarks; I recognized a few of them as the places I'd seen while falling down the rabbit hole.

I found Rhett on the very top floor, sitting at a desk with papers scattered across it. He had a stack of papers in his hand as well, and he was studying them through eyes narrowed in concentration, tapping the arm of his glasses absently against his lips.

He was the poster child of sophisticated sexiness, and I watched him quietly for a moment before it occurred to me that it would probably be polite to announce myself.

I knocked my knuckles lightly against the stair railing.

He lowered the papers and lifted his soft blue eyes my direction. "Hello, Gorgeous," he said with an easy smile.

I clung more tightly to the railing, so that hopefully he couldn't see the way his smooth voice made my knees feel a bit weak.

"Caden said you were looking for me?"

"Yes." He eyed the jacket I wore, and some emotion that I couldn't decipher flashed across his face and disappeared just as quickly.

“Come here,” he said, beckoning me over.

I’d still been considering running until this point; but there was a cool, calm authority in his tone that made me want to give in to whatever he wanted to show me. It was different than the raw power Adrian exuded, maybe, but there was still something quietly regal about it.

I hugged the jacket to myself and followed him as he abandoned his papers at the table and set off down a long row of shelves. At the end of the row was a floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window, the colorful panes forming a beautiful image of a woman in a blue dress, her hands outstretched and her golden hair cascading down to her waist.

Alice.

I looked down at my own blue dress, the hem of it stained from my walk, and I was struck again with the feeling that this world and everything about it—past and future—was impossible, no matter what Mama Su might have said.

I was still staring at the window when Rhett walked back to my side.

He was holding a book with a cracked red cover.

“I’ve read all of Earth’s tomes about our empire’s history—Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass, etcetera. They’re a decent starting place. But they get many things wrong, and they’re incomplete.” He offered me the book.

I hesitated, but in the end my curiosity got the better of me, same as it did Alice, and I couldn’t help but take the massive, leather-bound volume from him. Our hands brushed as I did, and that same weakness threatened my knees again.

He moved a little closer, pressing his arm against mine and helping me support the book’s fragile spine.

I thought he might have been subtly steadying me as well, but he kept his eyes on the book.

“Careful now. This is very old.”

I flipped slowly through the yellowed pages, partly to distract myself from the feel of his arm against mine. The sleeves of his linen shirt were rolled up, and I wished for a moment that I wasn’t wearing this jacket, so that I could feel his skin against mine.

“These pages contain the rest of the story,” he said. “Not of just the first Alice and her first visit here, but of the later ones, too. Of the child that the first Alice left behind, and how that child grew into a powerful

woman who defeated the Queen of Hearts and took the title for herself. And then of the Heartstone's creation and the consequences of it."

"Sounds fascinating."

I was trying to keep my voice dry and detached, to remain nonchalant, because I was *not* interested in staying in this world, so why did I need to know its history?

The problem was, it really *did* sound fascinating.

My ancestors had entire books written about them.

I wanted to keep refusing to believe that, but the more I flipped through these pages, the more I *felt* it to be true. Plus, there were pictures alongside some of the handwritten text—pictures of women who undoubtedly had the same heart-shaped face, the same full lips, the same wide eyes as me. And that woman in the window in front of me...

Could I really walk away from all of them?

It was obvious my feigned disinterest hadn't fooled Rhett, judging by the way he was smiling at me. "I could certainly tell you lots of fascinating stories, if you wished."

I let myself get lost for a moment in a daydream of spending the afternoon in this library, cuddled up next to him while he recited story after story.

Could I really walk away from *him*?

I hugged the book carefully against my chest, pulling my arm away from his.

"I wanted you to have it," he said, "so in case you do decide to really leave here, you will at least be able to read and know your true history—all of the information that we believe that Shade took from you." His voice hardened at the mention of Bryce.

I turned away before he could see my frown.

"There were other books that told of these things—better books, really—in my own kingdom, but..."

"You had to leave them behind?" I guessed, remembering Caden's story about how quickly the Sweeping Night had upturned his life.

"Worse than that, I'm afraid," Rhett said.

"How so?"

It took him a long time to answer, and his voice was barely a whisper when he said, "I stayed for as long as I could. But the people of the Fire Kingdom who weren't touched by the Sweeping Night themselves still

suffered indirectly; there was a lot of fear, a lot of anger circling throughout our land. Some of which led to riots, and some of those riots led to destruction that eventually reached my palace—and the books there, of course.”

“No way...”

“We tried different enchantments to protect them, but the fires burned for too long. There was nothing left but ashes by the time I left, and there will be nothing but ashes when I go back—if I’m ever able to go back.”

“I’m sorry.” It didn’t seem like enough, but it was all I could think to say.

He tried to give me a weak smile, but didn’t quite manage it.

“The past is the past,” he said after a moment. “Worth remembering—so read the book I gave you—but we don’t need to dwell on it, do we?” He managed something closer to a smile this time, and he offered me his arm and walked me back to the stairs.

I don’t know if it was his closeness, or the fact that we were on the third level—and heat rises and all that—but I was burning up, suddenly.

I slipped out of the jacket without really thinking about it, and I draped it over my arm. I started to reach for the railing when I noticed the way he was looking at me.

My skin flushed even hotter.

“Sorry,” he said, that hint of a smile still on his lips as he absently pressed his glasses to them again, studying me. “I don’t mean to stare so rudely, but you in that dress...”

“What about it?” My voice sounded coy. I hadn’t even meant for it to, it just happened automatically even though I knew it wasn’t fair to flirt with him—not when I was planning to find my way home at the next chance I got.

Fair or not, it was obvious that the shift in my tone had caught his attention.

He moved to the step just below me. He was tall enough that his eyes were still level with mine, and his lips were tantalizingly close. His hand reached for the railing, gripping it right next to mine, close enough that our hands pressed together and I felt the warmth of his skin

“It isn’t easy to distract me from my notes and books,” he said in his quiet voice, which was suddenly missing some of the elegant restraint I’d

come to expect from him. “But I have a feeling I could ignore them as long as you were standing nearby, looking the way you do in that dress.”

I didn’t feel like leaving anymore.

I forgot all of the reasons I’d wanted to leave, and I thought only of that heat of his hand against mine—the same heat that was traveling across my skin, settling in my chest and...other, more private places.

If he didn’t stop looking at me like that, it was possible that I was actually, literally going to melt.

“Give me a tour of the library?” I suggested.

His smile quirked—probably because my arousal was painfully obvious in my raspy voice— and he agreed and took me by the arm again. He led me down the stairs.

I felt like I was being escorted into an elaborate ball, even though our audience was made up of nothing except books, squishy armchairs, and several of what appeared to be torn out pages of books—until we came closer to them, at which point they scrunched into thin, wiggly little creatures that inched hurriedly away from us.

“Bookworms,” Rhett said.

“Of course they are,” I replied with a bemused little grin.

He laughed quietly, and his hand slid to my lower back.

I shivered at the feel of his fingertips against the dress’s relatively thin fabric.

“Alex?”

“Hm?”

He chuckled again. “I just asked you if you liked to read?”

“Oh, sorry.”

Stop thinking about where his hands are, and where they could be.

“Um, I did, once,” I said. “I’ve read those Alice books you mentioned. And lots more, when I was little, but then I got to high school, and then college, and reading became a mandatory thing, and I sort of stopped enjoying it.”

“What did you study in college?”

“I have a bachelor’s degree in Architecture. I’d planned to go on and get my master’s. I wanted to become a city planner eventually, but...”

All of the arguments that Bryce and I’d had over my attempt at a career were suddenly flashing through my head. The sour memories

abruptly made me forget about that fire Rhett was igniting across my skin and in my heart.

“But what?” Rhett prompted.

“I changed my mind.”

“Did you?” He pulled me to a stop, his skeptical expression demanding the truth.

“You’re a difficult person to fool, aren’t you?” I asked, frowning.

“I’ve been told I read people as well as I read books.”

“Fine—you’re right. I didn’t change my mind, really, but Bryce thought I had no future in it. *No one would want to hire a woman architect*, he used to say.”

Rhett snorted. “He sounds like an insufferable ass.”

“And there it is,” I said, smiling weakly, “you managed to figure out in one conversation what it took me nine years to fully realize.”

“In your defense,” he said, gently, “he was—quite literally—inhumanly powerful, and poisoning your mind in ways we can only guess at.”

I kept to myself for several minutes after that, wandering through the library and trying to sort out all of the thoughts racing through my head. Rhett let me be, but his concern was still obvious in the way he kept glancing my way.

After what may have been the hundredth of those worried glances, I managed to choke out some of my painful thoughts: “He might have killed my mother, Adrian said.”

“Yes.”

“And he was trying to keep me from knowing about this place so I wouldn’t come back to save it from...from that creature that he’s in some way a part of, right? The *Nightmarcher*.”

Rhett nodded. “Those are our theories.”

“Why didn’t he just kill me, if he was so worried about the possibility of me saving Wonderland?”

“Hard to say. He might have been hoping he could find a way to take the stone’s power for himself, or to otherwise use you somehow.”

“You four kings kind of want to do the same thing though, don’t you?”

“Not like that,” Rhett said sternly. “Not like that at all.”

“How do I know that’s true? How do I know that I’m really supposed to be your *queen*, and not just some pawn you intend to use?”

He started to answer, but stopped. Then he closed the distance between us and took my hands in his. They were much larger than mine, and his grip was strong but his skin was surprisingly soft—the sort of hands that were used to carefully and purposely searching through old books, I supposed, and he threaded his fingers through mine with the same sort of careful intent.

“You don’t,” he said, tilting his face toward mine. “But I will prove it to you. We all would, I think—but only if you give us the chance.”

I found myself leaning closer to him, inhaling the words as they fell from his lips.

“I can’t speak for the others in every way,” he said, “but I promise you that I would make sure you felt every bit like the queen that you are, at every chance you allowed me to.”

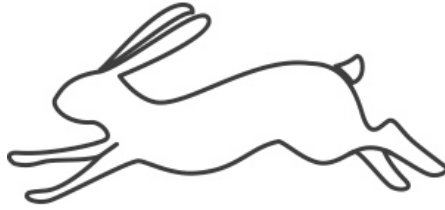
That light inside of me blossomed again.

He was close enough that it bled from my body into his, until it was impossible to tell who it was coming from.

“And if you can’t believe what I say, then trust the way that stone inside of you is reacting to us.” One of his hands left mine and traveled up the curves of my body, tracing the low neckline of the dress, feeling its way through that warmth that the Heartstone had pooled between our chests.

I breathed in a deep, shaking breath—just as the sound of a door opening and closing down below interrupted us.

CHAPTER 9



In Which I (sort of) Learn to Dance

I stepped away from Rhett.

The light of the Heartstone faded, although it didn't extinguish completely as I leaned over the balcony railing, peered down to the first floor and saw Emory looking up at me.

I released a tensely held breath, relieved to see him. If anybody had to interrupt that moment with Rhett, at least it was Emory and his friendly smile.

I glanced back and saw that Rhett had composed himself quickly. He finished fixing the collar of his shirt, gave me a conspiratorial little grin, and then headed down the stairs to greet Emory while I finished getting that fluttering power in my chest under control.

Once the light had smothered to a glow that was still warm, but hardly visible, I followed Rhett. He and Emory had launched immediately into a quiet conversation that was causing both of their brows to furrow with concern.

I was glad to have their eyes off me for once, because I'm not sure how I managed to descend the staircase without falling and breaking my neck.

I tripped at least three times on the way down, thanks to the beading of my slippers constantly getting caught in the many layers of my dress. Getting to the bottom without dying or otherwise making a fool of myself felt like a ridiculously big accomplishment.

Once there, Emory abruptly dropped the conversation with Rhett and turned to me, his eyes lighting up like this was his first glimpse of me on our very first date. His smile was so genuine that I couldn't help but return it, even though I was really more interested in knowing what he and Rhett were just talking about.

"Hello," I said, suppressing a laugh at the way he seemed to have slipped into a daydream at the mere sight of me.

"Hello," he replied, after Rhett elbowed him in the ribs.

"It's the dress, isn't it?" I asked. "I think it might be magical."

"I think it's mostly the person wearing it," he said, his smile turning a bit sheepish as he rubbed a hand across the back of his neck.

I lifted the garment's skirts and let them fall, focusing on smoothing each layer as heat rushed to my face.

I *really* wasn't used to all of this attention, and I couldn't decide how I felt about it.

It was hard enough to process the way Rhett had just been looking at me, speaking to me, touching me, and the fact that I'd *wanted* him to do all those things. Now here I stood, under the adoring gaze of him *and* Emory, and it was overwhelming to think about wanting *both* of them, and them wanting me...

And this was just the beginning.

There were the other two as well, and if I decided to stay...

How was this going to work?

My thoughts were pounding, my close friend Anxiety doing his thing again and firing fears and what-ifs at me at a breakneck pace.

My hands were shaking, and I realized then that I'd dropped Caden's jacket at some point, and so I had no way of covering up my trembling unless I awkwardly dismissed myself and went back upstairs. But that familiar urge to bolt that often came with my anxiety attacks was there. I was already imagining myself racing up the stairs—*just to get my jacket*, I'd claim, but then I might hide up there for awhile too.

Then Emory said, "Has anybody asked you to dance, yet?"

The question—his voice—cut through that thick haze of fear that was threatening to encase me.

I managed a polite: "Huh?"

He laughed. "A dress like that, I feel like you should be dancing in it."

I tried to force my hands to be still, my voice not to shake as I said, “Are *you* asking me to dance?”

He held out his hand.

I eyed it somewhat suspiciously. “What were you and Rhett talking about a moment ago?” I asked. “Because it feels like maybe you have bad news to give me, and you’re just stalling.”

“Just a touch, maybe.”

I hesitated, even though the honesty surprised me and made me want to take his hand even more.

“Nobody dances in this kingdom,” he said. “It’s tragic, really.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but I don’t really dance in *any* kingdom.”

“Nonsense.”

I looked to Rhett, hoping for help.

He just smiled. “Maybe if you satisfy this urge Emory has to dance, he’ll stop insisting that the rest of the kingdom needs to drop everything it’s doing and learn to waltz with him.”

“*One* time, I suggested throwing a proper party in this perfectly well-equipped palace,” Emory told me. “One instance of trying to instill some culture here like we had back in the Frost Kingdom, and they act like I’ve gone on a tirade and completely forgotten that we’re in the middle of a war and the possible end of our entire world and all that.”

I sighed wistfully. “Dancing *would* be a nice distraction from all that other stuff, wouldn’t it?”

His face brightened.

Rhett walked over to a cabinet in the corner of the room and began to sift through it, and eventually turned back to us with some sort of contraption that looked like a cross between an old record player and a microwave. He placed it on the table and then went back for a box full of small, cube-shaped objects. He sorted those cubes and seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of each one before making a decision and then plunking a cream-colored one into a receptacle on top of the record-player contraption.

The room filled with the *tick tick tick* of him turning the crank on the machine’s side.

So this was apparently really happening.

“Okay, I’ll make you a deal,” I said. “One dance, and then you have to tell me whatever you told Rhett before.”

Emory's expression turned momentarily distant, but he recovered quickly. "I'd planned on telling you anyway, so that seems more than fair to me."

"Also, you can't make fun of my coordination. Or lack thereof."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he said, taking my hand.

"And there's a chance I might trip over this dress and drag you down with me, and I'm not responsible for any bones you might break."

His free hand slipped around me, pressed into the space just above the small of my back. "Relax," he said, bringing his mouth close to my ear. "I've got you."

The music started.

I met Emory's gaze, and I nodded—even though I wasn't good at relaxing.

People who didn't truly understand anxiety didn't understand how *hard* it was to follow that command once you had started spiraling the way I had a minute ago.

There wasn't a switch I could flip.

Emory's touch didn't magically heal me.

But he did make my thoughts slow enough so that I could keep up with them, and so I could push the fear out for a few minutes and...well, function.

He guided me effortlessly over the floor.

I was twirled and dipped, spun away and then spun back in one fluid motion, all in time to the music. My dress shimmered as I spun, and the reflection of us in the library windows looked like something from a movie.

There was no way that was us.

No way that was me.

There was no way this was becoming my life.

"I think you might actually be making me look graceful," I said as the song slowed a bit and he pulled me closer. He let his arms rest casually against my hips, while mine draped around his shoulders.

"Give yourself some more credit," he said, grinning. "I've danced with far worse."

The thought of him dancing with anyone else caused a tinge of jealousy that I really had no business feeling.

"You said your kingdom threw parties often?"

“Mmhm.”

“Lots of dancing?”

“Once upon a time,” he said, his smile falling a bit.

I was curious about that life he’d come from, but I didn’t pressure him for more details; I’d already heard Caden and Rhett’s stories, and my heart was heavy enough from them—plus, Emory didn’t seem in a hurry to talk about his past. He was much more devoted to the present.

To me.

There was no denying that devotion in his eyes, even if I couldn’t understand it.

He just wants me to help him save that kingdom and its parties, I told myself firmly. And I could help him. All of them. It doesn’t have to be any deeper or more complicated than that.

“You look troubled,” he said, brushing a few stray sprigs of hair from my forehead.

“It’s been a long day,” I replied.

“You still want to go home?” The question was as pure as everything else about this beautiful man; I felt like I could have told him that I *did*—that I wanted to run back to Earth and hide and leave this dying world behind—and he wouldn’t have judged me even for a second.

But what I said, my gaze fixed determinedly on his, was: “I think I just want to dance some more.”

His lips parted thoughtfully. Closed again, and then he swallowed hard. “We can dance all night, if you like,” he whispered.

The magic buried in me flared again.

It brought that faint glow to my heart, but it wasn’t bright enough to keep the space around us from feeling intimate.

We were an island of two for a moment, even though I knew Rhett was still nearby. But as the dance continued, I chanced a glance at him every now and then; he’d busied himself with organizing books on a shelf far away from us, and I couldn’t help but eventually wonder what was going through his head.

Our moment had been interrupted, and then I’d gone on to dance with our interrupter.

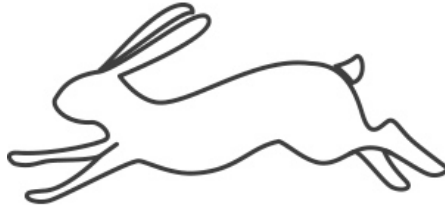
True, he’d insisted, and he didn’t strike me as the outwardly jealous type—he was too rational, I thought. But he did seem like he was trying to distract himself from Emory and me.

I'd just made up my mind to ask him to dance the next song, when all of a sudden we heard shouting from outside the windows.

Seconds later, one of those windows shattered as an orb of purplish black hurled through it.

The orb landed on the floor just a few feet away, and three more soon followed it, sending more window glass scattering as they came.

CHAPTER 10



In Which I Get a Terrible Haircut

Emory pushed me behind him and shouted for Rhett. “What *are* those things?”

“*Borogroves*,” Rhett answered, just as the orbs evaporated into clouds of grey, which then took the shape of birds with gleaming violet eyes and ruffled black feathers. They looked like mutant crows that had just been sucked into and spit out of a tornado.

I backed away, searching for something to arm myself with.

The borogrove closest to me lifted into the air with several mighty flaps, and then it dove, raking through my hair and coming away with a clump of my golden locks clutched between its talons.

I felt blood oozing from my scalp.

The creature gained altitude once more.

It dove, and I ducked as Emory knocked it away with the help of a book even larger than the one Rhett had given me.

A second bird streaked toward us with a menacing caw, but it met a quickly summoned strand of fire from Rhett—the same sort of white fire he’d controlled when we’d first met on Earth. The room filled with the nauseating scent of burning flesh and feathers.

I backed my way toward a table as a third borogrove set its beady gaze on me.

When it streaked my direction, I waited until the last possible second and then dove underneath that table, causing a crash landing that left the bird with one bent wing and even more ruffled feathers.

The cry it let out in response was murderous. Blood chilling. It hobbled a bit before uprighting itself and twisting its head all the way upside down so it could glare at me.

It opened its long pointy beak, displaying multiple rows of sharp little teeth.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Emory and Rhett, both of them distracted by two more shadowy orbs that had just dropped into the library.

I also saw several large shards of the broken window gleaming on the floor.

The bird hissed and started toward me.

I scrambled as fast as I could for the nearest glass shard. I snatched it, wincing a bit as the jagged edge scraped my skin, and then I spun and stabbed—

The sharp end of my makeshift dagger rose up just as the creature fell over me. I pierced its neck. Blood splattered down my arm.

The borogrove collapsed in a gory, shuddering heap on top of me, and I rolled wildly away from it, fighting the urge to scream and vomit.

I crawled back underneath the table, shaking.

I spotted the first creature that had attacked me; it was perched on the top of a shelf, still clutching my hair in its talons. It seemed to be surveying the situation—watching as Emory and Rhett killed one of its associates after another—and then it let out a sudden low cry, one that sounded like the wind howling as a storm approached, and it flapped toward the broken window.

The others followed.

Rhett noticed this, and for some reason the sight of them retreating caused a look of horrific realization to flash across his face.

He sprinted toward that broken window, fire gathering on his fingertips as he did. He was moving so fast that I thought he was going to launch himself out after the retreating flock; but he stopped at the last second, his balance teetering dangerously as he leaned through the window and flung the summoned fire out into the night air.

I couldn't see outside well enough to know if his attack was successful.

I lowered my gaze back to the one I'd attacked.

It continued to twitch.

I continued to feel like I was going to throw up.

Emory reached me an instant later. He pulled the table from above me and then dropped to my side, checking the severity of the injury to my head before hauling me into his arms. He carried me to a chaise in one of the library's nooks and laid me on it, shining a nearby lamp toward my head and parting my sticky, bloodied hair so he could take a closer look.

"I'm okay," I managed to stammer. "Just a little freaked out, is all."

He performed his own thorough examination before he agreed with my assessment. "It doesn't look like it did too much damage."

"It wasn't trying to inflict damage," Rhett said, walking back to us.

"What was it it doing, then?" I asked.

"It was a fucking spy. And a collector."

"A collector?"

"Whoever sent those creatures was trying to get a piece of you so that they could use it to keep track of you. There are certain spells, certain objects that can find people as long as you have something for them to base their search on."

I reached absently for the torn patch of my scalp. "My hair..."

Rhett nodded. He cursed again, and his fists clenched as he glanced toward the broken window. It was strange to see his usually calm demeanor as shattered as that glass, and the sight was nearly as frightening than the borogrove's actual attack.

"So what we were afraid of is almost certainly true, then," Emory said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"That's what we were talking about earlier," he said, his gaze sliding to Rhett for a moment before fixing on me. "We had mounting evidence that the enemy knew you were here, and this all but confirms that he is aware you're staying in this palace."

I sat up. "The enemy...the Nightmarcher?"

Rhett nods. "And there will be no hiding you from him, once that piece of you is in his possession."

The full effect of his words took awhile to settle. "What if I left this world? He could still find me, even then?"

Neither of them said anything for a long time.

Finally, Emory spoke: "The reason I was upset earlier was because I was sent to tell you that King Adrian has declared that we can't wait any longer to move. We need to go after the Crown of Five Jewels. The enemy

is getting bolder; a horde of his monsters attacked a village in the center of the Sun Kingdom this morning. And as they were driven out, they apparently declared that things would be getting worse very soon unless we handed you over. Multiple eyewitnesses report that this was said..."

My stomach did several painful flips.

"Obviously, we don't plan on handing you over to anyone," Emory continued. "But Adrian wanted me to tell you that he expected you to... um...*Stop being stubborn and...*"

"And what?" The memory of my private conversation with the Sun King made the words snap out of me.

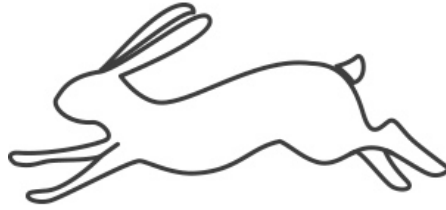
"And to... well, *fight*."

I got to my feet and moved to the broken window, avoiding clumps of feathers and splatters of blood as I went. As I stared at the blue moon rising over the alien landscape before me, I thought of that book that Rhett had given me, of the history in its yellowed pages, and all of the eyes of my ancestors looking up at me.

What will people end up writing about me, I wonder?

Without taking my eyes off that moon, I said, "You can tell Adrian that his stupid little *declarations* aren't necessary. Because I had already decided to help you save Wonderland."

CHAPTER 11



In Which I Start Preparing For War

“This’ll fare better against blood ’n’ such than that poor dress ‘o’ yours did, I should think,” Mama Su said, helping me pull the tunic over the light chainmail that was already resting uncomfortably against my skin. “Mind ya— I’d still prefer no blood ended up on it, o’ course.”

“Sorry again about the dress,” I said, appraising my traveling attire in the ornate mirror before me. A flowing blue tunic over dark leggings that were tucked into boots, and a hooded cape that Mama Su was currently fixing around my shoulders...

I looked like a strange cross between a hipster and an amateur Renaissance Fair performer.

She waved a dismissive hand. “Dresses ain’t irreplaceable. Queens, on the other hand...”

“I’m not technically a queen. Not yet.”

It had been a day and a half since the incident in the library—since I’d decided to embrace my destiny or whatever.

Just enough time for the doubt to start creeping fully in.

“Ya look the part, even now, crown or no,” Mama Su said, beaming at me as if I was her own child, all grown up and heading off to save the world. “One more thing for ya, though...” She shuffled over to one of the room’s many dressers, rooted through the contents of one of its drawers for a minute before pulling out a pin in the shape of a small yellow bird.

“A jubbub bird,” she explained as she fixed it to the collar of my tunic. “People ‘round here are annoyed by the kind of racket it can make,

but where I come from, they're a much rarer sight to see, so it's considered good luck to even hear one. Consider it a reminder that not everyone sees things the same way, hm?"

I was about to ask her where, exactly, she came from, but we were interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by a maid informing us that King Adrian wished to speak with me.

I groaned.

"Be nice now," Mama Su grinned. "Word is the future of Wonderland depends on you getting along with its kings, didn't it?"

"I'm hoping that part of this quest is negotiable," I said under my breath.

She chuckled to herself, readjusting the bandage that had been carefully secured among the intricate crown of braids she'd arranged my hair into.

I was a little sad she wasn't coming with us. Between her pleasant company and her awesome skills with hair, I felt like I could justify bringing her with me.

Maybe that could be my first declaration as *queen*.

Maybe I could exchange her for Adrian...

That last thought caused a small smile—but it disappeared the second he actually entered the room.

He was as stupidly handsome as ever in riding pants and a loose shirt that was much plainer than his usual regal attire, but still clearly well-made and tailored to his impressive body. He wasn't wearing his crown, either, but he didn't need it. There was no way you could mistake him for anything other than a king, and I hated the way my body automatically reacted to his presence, betraying me and sending little flickers of desire pulsing through me.

"Hello, Alex."

"Your Majesty."

He frowned at the formal tone of my voice but didn't comment on it. "I'm sorry I haven't been to check on you before now," he said, eying that bandage on my head. "Making arrangements for all of us to leave the kingdom has proven much more difficult and time-consuming than I thought it would."

"So all of us *are* going, then? Don't you think you should stay? As Wonderland's last officially standing king and all that?"

Hey, I figured it was worth a try.

“Thank you for your concern.” His smile was tight. “But you needn’t worry yourself; we have stand-ins for all of us—yourself included. The majority of the empire won’t know we are gone.”

“Stand-ins?”

“There are creatures known as mimics that are quite talented at replicating creatures and objects, and I’ve successfully employed their services before. They will fool most of the common people, and as for our enemies...Rhett has devised a plan to try and thwart their ability to track you, despite the fact that they successfully stole a piece of your essence to use in their spells. All of our tricks won’t fool them forever, of course, but we should at least be able to get a head start.”

His gaze had drifted back to my head wound at the mention of the borogrove's thievery, and it stayed there for a long, uncomfortable moment.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” he finally said, quietly. “I’m sorry.”

The apology—and the vulnerability in his voice— took me by surprise.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I said with a shrug.

He kept staring.

So I kept awkwardly stammering: “Emory said head wounds just bleed a lot, so they often look worse than they are. Honestly I’m more upset that they messed up my hair. That’s the *real* reason I’ve decided to fight back against this evil darkness or whatever. I mean, they can’t give a girl a bald spot and expect her to not respond by going on a quest to completely obliterate them, right?”

I thought I saw the beginning of a smile twitching his lips, but he turned away before it completely formed.

“Hurry up and finish packing,” he said, “and then have the maids escort you to the stables. You have five minutes. Don’t be late.”

I glowered after him as he closed the door without looking back. “He just can’t leave a room without commanding someone to do something, can he?”

“‘E’s a king,” Mama Su said, “s’what they do.”

“The other three are also kings, and they aren’t nearly so bossy,” I pointed out.

“Ta each their own,” she said with a shrug. “There’re different ways to lead people, an’ I bet you could learn from all four of them kings.”

“We’ll see,” I said, not bothering to keep the doubt from my voice.

“An’ if he starts gettin’ too bossy, just remember that you’re the queen an’ you can boss ‘im right back.”

I laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“See that ya do.” She adjusted the jubjub pin she’d given me, smoothed the front of my shirt, and then leaned back to admire her work. “I do believe you’re ready.”

“I wish you were coming with me.”

“No thank ya. Too much excitement for my ol’ blood.” She retrieved my packed bag and carried it back to me. “Sides, this one gets ta complainin’ if we even go fer so much as a light jog,” she added, jerking a thumb toward the face on the back of her head. “Or at least, that’s what I’m blaming this fat belly of mine on.”

“I guess we’ll see each other again?”

“I hope so, m’dear,” she said as I bent down to give her a hug. “I really do.”

Two maids escorted me until the stables—and three of the kings—were in sight. Then they bowed and headed back inside, while I adjusted the weight of one of the bags on my shoulders and set my path determinedly toward those kings.

Guess this is really happening.

I made it only a few steps before my eyes were drawn away from the path to the stables and toward one of the gates protecting the palace grounds; I could have sworn I saw a shadowy figure leaning against that gate, watching me. But as I stared, it flickered away—just as it had at the bottom of the rabbit hole and in the labyrinth.

“There it went again,” I breathed, picking up my pace.

“There *what* went again?” came a sudden disembodied voice.

“I...um, nothing,” I said automatically.

Because it was completely gone now, and I'd convinced myself that I was imagining things just as quickly.

I slowed down as the weight on my shoulders suddenly increased, and I glanced back to see the Cheshire cat taking shape, his squat body curling awkwardly on top of my backpack.

"Oh—hello, Lewis."

His ears twitched and he snorted at the moniker.

"You coming with me? I'm not running away like you were hoping, you know."

"I still have nothing better to do," he said with a yawn. "So I'll tag along until I get bored."

"Whatever floats your boat."

"What boat?"

"It's a saying on Earth."

"Hm."

"Whatever sprinkles your donuts. Whatever melts your butter. Whatever milks your goat. Whatever tickles your pickle—you know, do whatever the fuck you want, essentially. It's very good advice, really."

"Earth seems like a strange place full of strange things."

"Says the cat who fell out of a cup of tea."

His tail flicked, tickling my ear in the process.

Emory and Rhett smiled as I approached the stables. Caden took my bags from me, earning himself a nasty hiss from Lewis—which he ignored. He shooed the cat away with his foot and tossed the bags to Emory.

Emory made an obvious effort to hide his annoyance at being made the designated bellhop, but then he disappeared into the stable with the bags. Lewis trotted after him, the edges of his body fading into the air as he reached the door.

"Ready for our road trip, Rabbit?" Caden asked me, grinning.

"You look entirely too excited about this adventure that's going to be filled with danger and darkness and probably, you know, death and stuff."

"He's been bouncing around like an idiot all morning," Rhett informed me. "Like we're going on vacation or something."

"It *feels* like a vacation, just getting away from this stuffy palace."

"You treat it as such and you likely won't ever have to come back here, because Alex is right—you're going to end up dead," Rhett said,

drily.

“Don’t you ever get tired of being so...so...”

“Level-headed and rational about things? No, not really.”

I offered Caden a small smile, attempting to distract from the argument. He returned it, and I was surprised at how happy seeing it made me; he’d grown on me a lot faster than I ever would have guessed he could have.

Maybe because he seemed like such an unlikely king, and I *felt* like such an unlikely queen—so we kind of had something in common.

“There’s something we need to do before we leave, by the way,” Rhett said, digging through the bag at his feet until he came up with a small white box. Inside of it was a pile of fine, silvery powder. “This is abstrusio dust,” he explained.

“Adrian told me you had come up with some way to keep our enemies from tracking me. Is this it?”

“Hopefully. I’ve never tried it before, but my research suggests that you should be able to absorb it, and it will rearrange your energy in such a way that it won’t match the stolen essence of you that those enemies will be trying to zero in on.” He dipped his fingers into the dust and studied my face for a moment. “May I?”

“Um...Sure, why not? It’s not like this is the weirdest thing I’ve experienced over the past few days.”

A faint smile played at his lips as he reached up and gently traced the powder along my forehead, across my cheek bones, and then down to the hollow of my throat. He was completely absorbed with the motion—with me—and a flashback of that moment on the library’s stairs raced through my mind, along with wild thoughts of all the ways that moment could have gone.

I swallowed hard. “So, this is some sort of spell you created?”

He nodded.

“Couldn’t help but notice that you also know how to summon fire.”

“Ah, yes. That.” He closed the white box, put it away, and wiped the last of dust residue onto my neck before saying: “Most of the books that I *did* manage to save from my palace were tomes of magic and spells, and I was up most of last night working out how to make abstrusio dust with their help. But the fire thing is *true magic*, and something I’ve been studying for years.”

“True magic?”

“That is, not illusions or trickery like much of what you see in Wonderland today.”

“And it used to be much more widespread throughout Wonderland,” Caden interjected, crossing his arms across his broad chest. The rabbit tattoo, I noticed, was still on his forearm. “But when it split into four kingdoms, his ancestors took most of the magical artifacts and documents that enabled people with true magic abilities to learn how to use them.”

“An act of my grandfathers,” Rhett said, “for better or for worse. A lot of people think that the loss of such potentially powerful magic was for the betterment of our world. Fewer powerful sorcerers running around obviously made for a more peaceful atmosphere...”

“There’s a debate about it,” Caden said.

“One that isn’t particularly worth focusing on, in addition to all the other things we should be focusing on.”

Caden looked like he disagreed, but in the end he just shrugged. “Anyway,” he said, “if you’re done putting her war paint on her, I’d say the horses are probably prepared by now.”

I followed the two of them inside, somewhat reluctantly; my one and only experience on horseback was as an eight-year-old girl scout, when the mare I’d been riding had gotten spooked and had taken off in a mad gallop that I’d been sure was going to end with my tragic death being announced on the news.

Needless to say, I wasn’t really looking forward to repeating the experience.

Emory was already in the saddle of a majestic, pure white creature that had to have had unicorn somewhere in its lineage or something.

Adrian was there too, standing beside a beast of a horse with a dappled grey coat and black eyes that made him look vaguely demonic.

“Do you have any riding experience?” Adrian asked.

“Um, not really.”

“Then you will ride with me.”

“What, like both of us on that...thing?”

“His name is Bodhi, and he does not have the same limitations that Earth horses might have—he is more than capable of carrying us both.”

Honestly, I was less worried about the terrifying demon horse hybrid than I was about the thought of sitting that close to Adrian for so long.

This was going to be a long trip; it would be a lot more bearable with Emory or Rhett, or even Caden.

“I’ll ride with someone else.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “I have the largest horse and the most experience riding.”

“And the least amount of modesty,” I said.

“I’m pretty sure that largest horse thing is compensating for something,” Caden added cheerfully.

Adrian ignored him, his gaze still piercing into mine. “Time is of the essence.”

“Well I’d rather walk.”

“Stop being ridiculous.”

“Stop being so damn bossy.”

“She can ride my horse, and I can lead it—” Emory started to offer.

“No, she *cannot*,” Adrian growled at him before turning back to me. He smiled in a way that was more like a baring of fangs, and he said, “It is nearly two hundred miles to the ruins of Alice’s castle. If you would like to walk there, then be my guest.”

He swung onto his horse’s back in a graceful, effortless motion, and took off at a fast trot without looking back.

“I’ve never seen someone get under his skin quite like you seem to,” Rhett said, swinging onto the back of his own horse.

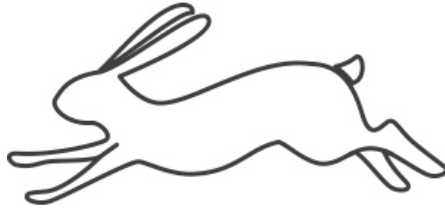
“It’s incredibly entertaining,” Caden said. “Please don’t ever stop.”

Emory just sighed.

Without a word, I did exactly what I said I wanted to do: I dutifully started to walk.

I knew I was being stubborn. I would have to give in eventually. But for the moment it seemed important for me to start this journey with just my own two feet carrying me, and so that’s what I did.

CHAPTER 12



In Which I Manage a Few Impossible Things

“So you have a bit of a stubborn streak,” Emory commented. He and his horse were walking beside me.

Adrian was just barely visible in the distance, while Caden and Rhett were scouting the path a few miles ahead of us all.

“It comes in handy sometimes,” I answered. The words jumbled a bit, as most of my concentration was on trying to keep moving at the quick pace I’d stupidly committed to.

What I didn’t want to admit was that, other times, my stubbornness contributed to me staying in bad situations for loooong past their expiration dates. Shitty jobs, shitty relationships...

Or, in this case, mile after agonizing mile of walking and jogging.

I probably would have kept going for a least a few miles more—or until my stupid self face-planted the ground; whichever came first. But luckily for me, it turned out that the Sun King was less stubborn than I was.

Or at least more concerned about that very real possibility of me passing out.

“I will make you a deal,” he said, slowing his horse to match my zombie-like stride.

“Go on,” I replied, still keeping my pace and refusing to look at him.

“Stop this foolishness before you hurt yourself, and I promise I will personally teach you to ride, and, if you insist, I will see to it that we find you your own suitable horse somewhere along our route.”

“...Fine,” I relented. It was nice to see that he was, in fact, capable of compromise. It felt like a small victory.

I stopped walking.

My knees promptly buckled beneath me.

Adrian and Emory were both off of their horses within seconds, kneeling to offer me water and then to slowly help me up. Between the three of us, I somehow ended up secure and comfortable on the back of the Adrian’s horse a few minutes later.

I mean, as secure and comfortable as I could be on the back of a giant beast, clinging to a powerful man who saw nothing wrong with proposing to a woman he’d only just met.

On the plus side, I was so exhausted from walking that even my anxiety seemed too tired to put up much of a fuss about the current situation.

Most of my focus was on not touching Adrian anymore than I had to. I sat stiffly, my fists clenching the back of his shirt to help me keep my balance.

After watching me warily for a few minutes, Emory left us and raced ahead to the others. Adrian and I kept a slower pace, riding in silence for several minutes, maybe an hour—I was too out of it to really tell—before he spoke.

“You stupid girl,” he muttered. “Your legs are shaking like mad. Can you even still feel them?”

“Not really. But I assume they’re still there, so it’s all good,” I said, unable to keep myself from resting my forehead against his back. I couldn’t talk *and* keep balancing in that uncomfortable position. “But just between us, that *might* have been the most physical activity I’ve done in like...months. That’s probably not a great thing to put on my resume for the whole possible *Queen of Wonderland* job, huh?”

“Perhaps not,” he said after a moment of consideration. “But you showed an impressive spark of determination at least. However stupid it was.”

“I’m glad my stupidity impressed you.”

He snorted out something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, and then stayed quiet for a few more minutes.

“You reminded me of a stupid thing my father used to make me do when I was younger,” he eventually said. “When you were trudging along

back there, still going even though you were clearly about to faint.”

“What stupid thing was that?”

“I used to have to walk a thin railing that spanned nearly the entire length of the rooftop garden at the palace—back and forth, back and forth, sometimes for hours at a time. My father insisted it taught poise and determination and focus.”

“And what happened if you fell off?”

He was quiet for a long time. Then he said, in a perfectly emotionless voice: “His favorite form of punishment was using the limbs of the acris tree, because the tips of them are covered in barbs.”

“That’s...”

“One misstep could result in pain for the entire kingdom. That was his point.”

“He sounds like he was a royal dick.”

Adrian didn’t reply.

I thought I felt his body tense a little, and I hurriedly added, “Sorry. Feeling a little drunk from the exhaustion and...yeah.”

“You should drink more water,” he suggested, slowing our pace enough that he could maneuver and grab a canteen out of one of the saddlebags.

I sipped from it for a bit, and I kept my mouth shut after that.

“He was,” Adrian began after a few more minutes of riding. “A dick, that is. But he is also the reason that my kingdom has the most powerful standing army in Wonderland, which is why we have not fallen to the darkness. Yet. And it will not fall as long as I am king—regardless of what I have to do to make sure of it.”

Power radiated through him with the last of those words; I could actually feel the air between us humming with it. It drew me in, made me forget, at least for the moment, that I had been trying to avoid touching him. My fists unclenched and my fingers brushed against his strong back, drawing a slight shiver from him.

My breathing quickened. I tried to slow it, to inhale deeply, purposely; but I ended up simply inhaling *him*—his steel and smoke and delicious, undeniably male scent—and that only made my pulse skip faster.

“I see things in black and white,” he said, shifting in the saddle a bit. “I will be the first to admit that. Either something will help my kingdom,

or it will hurt it it. But you..." He paused for a long moment, searching for the right words. "You are turning out to be more colorful than I could have ever expected."

"Was that a compliment?"

"In a way. I find your...*colorfulness* both alluring and infuriating, to be honest."

"At least I'm keeping things interesting for you."

"Indeed," he said, tilting his head so that I could only just see the slight curve of his lips.

A compromise *and* an almost smile, now.

If I could manage two such impossible things in one day, then maybe this whole being queen thing wouldn't be so hard after all.

We rode on for several more miles. I was falling asleep— between the surprisingly gentle gait of the demon horse and my new, more comfortable position of pressing my cheek against Adrian's back—but I wanted to study the weird landscape around me.

It was sloping downward, steeper and steeper, into a field of what I thought were flowers at first, but which turned out to be mostly tiny creatures that resembled dragonflies, only with much larger, velvety wings that were every shade of purple imaginable. They floated upward as group after group of unified bouquets as we trotted through them, swarming purple masses that slowly disappeared against the plum-colored sky.

That sky had been a soft heather grey when we'd started out, but the further south we walked, the darker it had become. I wasn't sure if it was because we were getting closer to the Sweeping Night, or if maybe time was working strangely—both were possibilities in this place. It *should* have been early afternoon, I thought, but it definitely didn't look it. There was light—the world was cast in a sickly, purplish green glow coming from somewhere—but I couldn't see the sun that was creating that glow.

I hardly trusted my eyes anymore, though.

Case in point: there had been a cluster of trees in the distance just a minute ago, I was positive of it.

Now there was nothing but flat horizon as far as I could see.

I felt a rush of homesickness. Earth had given me my fair share of shitty moments, but at least the days came and went steadily there. How many days had passed since I left? Maybe no time had passed on Earth at all.

For Rachel's sake, I hoped so. I hated to think about how I'd disappeared on her without a trace.

"Are you alright?" Adrian asked.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Why?"

"You've gone back to clenching your fists into my back as if you're considering murdering me."

"I'm not," I assured him. "Not at the moment, anyway."

He didn't pry beyond that, and I went back to studying the landscape in silence, until I spotted a field full of mounds of dirt that were covered in white flowers.

"Is that humming I hear?"

"Yes. It's coming from the flowers."

"Singing flowers...should have seen that coming in this place, probably."

"They're mourning daisies," he said quietly. "They grow over places where bodies are buried."

"Bodies..."

Adrian didn't elaborate; he only nudged his horse into a quicker pace.

A minute later, Lewis appeared—a welcome distraction taking shape among the saddlebag to my left. He spun circles, kneaded his claws in and out of the cloth, and then finally gave up on finding a comfortable sleeping position and leapt into the air instead—and then proceeded to stay there, his body somehow floating and walking casually alongside us.

You'd think I'd be used to this sort of thing by now, but I couldn't help but stare.

"How are you doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Gee, I wonder."

"I'm walking. Just like your horse."

"But you're doing it *in the air*."

"Yes. It's a great deal easier than walking on the ground, you know; not as hard on the paws. You should have tried it earlier. You could have stubbornly marched for several more miles this way."

"Except I'm pretty sure I can't float like you."

"Not with that kind of defeatist attitude about it, I suspect."

"Do you have anything useful to tell us, Cat?" Adrian interjected in a practiced, even tone.

“I’ve plenty of useful things to tell. If there’s anyone worth telling them to, that is.”

“Well if you don’t consider us worthy, then by all means, go away,” Adrian said.

The Cheshire cat grinned. He did several somersaults through the air, until he was in front of us, and then he air-walked backwards as he spoke. “I wouldn’t go into the Tovey Woods if I were you. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“Noted,” Adrian said.

“Why shouldn’t we—” I began, but the cat had already disappeared again. “He comes and goes annoyingly quickly.”

“Typical Cheshire cat behavior,” Adrian said with a shrug.

“Is it typical *forest* behavior too?” I asked, suddenly breathless with astonishment as I looked ahead and noticed that those trees I saw earlier were back again.

Adrian said nothing.

I thought about Lewis’s last words for a minute, trying to piece them together with what I remembered of the Alice books and such that existed on Earth. “He said *Tovey*, didn’t he? I thought it was the *Tulgey* Wood?”

“The Tulgey Wood is far to the west of us—in Rhett’s Kingdom of Fire,” the king explained. And then an afterthought: “I *wish* we were going to the Tulgey Wood. It’s a much friendlier place.”

“Isn’t it full of like...monsters and stuff? Isn’t that where the jabberwocky thingy lives?”

“Yes.”

“So what is Tovey Wood full of?”

“These days? I’m not sure. But we’re soon to find out, because cutting through those woods is by far the quickest route to our destination.” He sat up straighter. A soldier preparing to head into battle. That same palpable strength that had simmered around him earlier was back, pulling me closer to him once more.

My hands unclenched and slipped around his waist. My heart unclenched a bit more as well, and I simply let it open, forgetting about our arguments and stubbornness and focusing instead on the firmness of his stomach, on the way his muscles flexed as he rose and fell with the horse’s trot.

He pressed a hand over top of mine.

A brush of skin, a brief pinning of this small part of my body to his, and then he was back to focusing on the reins—it all lasted only a few seconds.

But in those seconds, something changed.

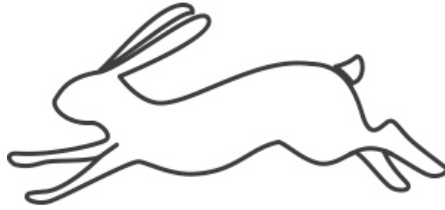
We had a long path ahead of us, literally and figuratively. But I could almost glimpse it in that moment—myself, standing beside this man, this king. Beside all of my kings, looking up at a Wonderland sky that wasn't quite so dark...

It was still strange, but my chest warmed at the thought.

Adrian's power seemed to expand in response, his strength enveloping me and making me forget about the danger we were rushing toward. He leaned forward, urging the horse faster again, and my body curved automatically with his.

"Hold on tight, my queen," he said. "We need to make it to the wood's edge before dark falls."

CHAPTER 13



In Which There's Some Concern About Trees

We didn't make it before darkness fell.

It was almost pitch black as we were setting up our camp for the night, and even Rhett's attempts at magic didn't seem to be having much luck penetrating that dark. After his fifth spell fizzled out—swallowed up by the strange mist rising up from the roots of the trees—I could tell he was getting frustrated.

"He's a perfectionist," Emory whispered to me. "He'll keep going until he gets it right, or sets himself on fire in the process; whichever comes first."

I sat in front of Emory, tucked between his legs and nibbling on a piece of bread, while he checked on my wound. The other two kings were circling the edges of our chosen campsite, scoping out possible signs of threats.

I'm not sure what they were looking for.

Everything about this place seemed threatening to me, from that weird fog that evaporated up through the soil, to the barely-there whispers I swore I kept hearing, to the way the spindly silver branches of the trees seemed to be moving even though there was no wind.

Emory unwound the bandage with careful fingers, brushing my scalp and sending tingles over it in the process.

"It looks better," he said approvingly, his touch lingering, absently curling a loose strand of my hair. From there it traveled down along the back of my neck and paused between my shoulder blades, and he gently

rolled his knuckles against my back. Even above the layers of armor and the shirt and cloak I wore, it still felt good.

“Feel free to keep doing that,” I said sleepily.

“Feeling tense?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure if it was the five mile walk, the twenty mile ride, or the weight of Wonderland on my shoulders that did it.”

“Probably some combination of all three,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice as he worked his hands a little more purposely against my back. “And you aren’t use to wearing armor, either,” he added, slipping a hand beneath the folds of my cloak and tugging at the bottom of my chainmail. “Not even something so lightly constructed as this. I can’t imagine the extra layers made your defiant march more enjoyable.”

“I honestly forgot about them. They probably contributed to more of a work out though, didn’t they? If I ever get back to Earth, maybe I’ll start a fad diet—the Chainmail Diet—and cash in on it.”

“You hardly need to diet.”

“Maybe not, but I could always use cash.”

He laughed, pulling me closer. “Love.” The word was a purr on his lips, a rumble deep in his chest. “You *do* realize that you have four kings prepared to give you everything you could ever want. You hardly need cash, either.”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around that, actually. None of this feels particularly real.”

“I assure you it is.” His fingers traced circles on a bit of exposed skin at my side. “The Night has swept through my kingdom, but my palace still stands. When the danger passes, I look forward to taking you there and giving you everything you ever wanted—and then some. We’ll restore that kingdom, and along the way we’ll throw feasts and grand balls, and dance together like we did in the library. Only without interruptions, this time.”

I was drifting off to the hum of his voice, to the feel of his heartbeat against my back, so for once my brain didn’t reject the idea of staying here forever—not at all. “That sounds nice,” I whispered.

“It will be,” he replied, his lips against my hair.

A flash of light woke me out of my dreamlike stupor. Sustained light, this time; Rhett was standing some ten feet away, above a small campfire of white flames, looking pleased with himself.

“Foxfire spell,” he informed us. “Won’t give off much heat. But it should provide us with plenty of light, and that should scare away most of the beasts.” His hands rested causally in his pockets as he surveyed our surroundings, the trees and the rocky ground now awash in the new fire’s glow.

The light spilled over him, too. And whether by magic or chance, he seemed to command every bit of it so that it hit him in all the right ways, curving over bare forearms exposed by his rolled up sleeves, illuminating his thoughtful little smile, caressing the strong line of his jaw.

Suddenly I felt like I was dreaming again.

I had to be, to be sharing a camp with these men.

Then I saw movement in the tree limbs once more, and what Rhett had just said fully registered in my brain—*beasts*. I woke the rest of the way up. I heard more whispers and creaks and groans of movement in the forest.

There was still no wind that I could feel, so I picked a spot of tangled branches and stared at it until I was sure that I saw them shake.

“Are those trees...moving?”

“Good eye,” Rhett said without taking his own gaze off the limbs. “Some of them are, because they’re not really trees; they’re *bramblesnatches*.”

“Bramblesnatches?”

“Not to be confused with their much friendlier cousin, the bandersnatch,” Emory said.

“How unfriendly are these?”

Rhett cleared his throat. He looked torn between wanting to tell me all the dramatic details and not wanting to scare me. “They’re very adept killers,” he eventually settled on. “Claws and teeth like giant wolves, but their entire bodies are weapons, really; picture a bunch of thorny vines twisted together into the shape of a beast. One of their favorite ways to kill is to simply curl themselves around a target, or sit on it, roll on it—resulting in a hundred thorns impaling their target.”

“So...very unfriendly.”

“And known for carrying some of the Nightmarcher’s soldiers and scouts on specially-constructed saddles,” Caden interjected, reappearing suddenly on the edge of our campsite.

Adrian followed soon behind him. “So we won’t go any deeper into these woods tonight,” he said, “as there are bound to be more of the beasts in the darker parts of this place— and they won’t be in their camouflaged form.” He surveyed the woods alongside Rhett for a moment, and then looked to our camp and seemed to be taking a mental inventory of everything we had in it.

I didn’t miss the way his gaze paused at the sight of me curled up against Emory. Something flickered in his steel eyes. Jealousy? Possessiveness? It was gone too quick to name, and his voice was toneless as he ordered: “Let’s unpack.”

“Will they stay at the edge of our camp?” I asked, tensing as I watched one of the trees—it seemed to be falling in slow-motion, folding into a pile of brush that shuffled away and left a gaping dark hole where it had been.

“If we’re lucky,” Caden said with grin.

“The light should keep them away,” Rhett said, “As long as we don’t do anything to draw them in.”

“We’ll be fine,” Adrian assured me. “Now, I believe you could use more rest than any of us, given the hike you took today.”

“I—”

“Go to sleep.”

“You’re doing that thing again,” I deadpanned. “The obnoxiously bossy thing.”

He responded by pulling a blanket from our pile of bags, walking over and dropping it wordlessly into my lap. He seemed distracted—maybe by something disturbing he’d seen in the woods while making his rounds? I didn’t know what, but something was...*off* with him.

So I decided not to argue this time.

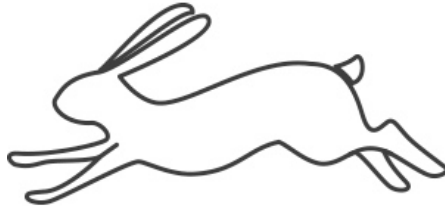
Emory’s hands were massaging all of the tender and sore parts of me again, and that helped me hold my tongue. Seriously, the man was like a professional masseuse. And a storyteller—as his hands worked over my body, his soothing voice worked over my mind, filing it with quiet tales of the kinder times and places in Wonderland.

Nothing about thorny wolves.

Only about fields of happily chattering flowers and magical streams of pure silver and other things that made me forget about this world’s beasts.

But as I was drifting off, I know I saw amber eyes glowing, watching me hungrily from the shadows.

CHAPTER 14



In Which I (sort of) Learn to Use a Sword

I was dreaming.

I *knew* it was a dream.

That didn't make it any less terrifying.

I was at the bottom of the rabbit hole again. Surrounded by brambles that were turning into wolves and crowding me, nipping at my heels and forcing me back, back, further back until I bumped into something—a person.

I turned, and Bryce was there. Or someone who *looked* like Bryce at least; he had the same wild, greenish-gold eyes, the same cruel curve to his smile. But his skin was much paler—grey, almost—and his movements were inhumanly quick as he stepped toward me. He wore a black jacket with an upside-down heart wrapped in thorns stitched over the chest, and in his gloved hand he held a curved knife.

Blood dripped from the blade.

Everything was wrapped in silence.

The only thing disrupting that quiet were those slow, surreally loud *plops* of blood.

I reached toward my heart, hoping to feel warmth or light or anything that might help protect me—but all I felt was blood. Breathing hard, I felt my way through the warm stickiness of it, pressing against the soaked, torn fabric of my shirt, searching.

The Heartstone, insisted a voice in the back of my mind. *It should be there. It should save you—*

I felt no stone.

I felt *nothing*.

Never mind the stone—there was a gaping hole where my *actual* heart should have been.

“What have you done?” I whispered, slowly lifting my eyes to the Shade of the Nightmarcher standing in front of me.

He shook his head.

It wasn't me.

I spun around.

Four crowned figures stood there, bodies silhouetted in the strange lighting at the bottom of the hellish pit I'd jumped into.

I bolted upright, awake before their faces became clear.

“Bad dreams, Rabbit-heart?”

I turned and saw Caden watching me. He looked concerned—or as concerned as that normally carefree and cocksure face of his could look—and he motioned for me to join him beside the fire.

But I didn't want to sit beside him. I didn't want to sit still. I couldn't. Instead, I stood—quietly and carefully so I wouldn't wake Emory or Rhett, who had been curled up on either side of me—and then I paced the length of the campsite. Back and forth, back and forth, my feet following the edge of the firelight like I was balancing on a tightrope.

No falling over now; it's too late, you're already in the middle of it.

After a minute Caden got to his feet as well, the concern etching deeper into his features. He stepped onto my tightrope and forced me to stop walking it, placing a gentle hand on my arm.

“Let's find some way to distract you, how about?”

I eyed him suspiciously, and he responded with a smile worthy of a saint.

“That sort of distraction isn't what I meant,” he said, “but I'm flattered that your mind automatically went there. And we absolutely *could* make that a reality, if that's what you want.”

I took a deep breath. It wasn't that I was completely opposed to the idea of letting him distract me however he wanted to; those blue eyes were deep enough to drown some of my rushing thoughts in, and just the light touch of his fingers against my arm was sending a pleasantly distracting tingling across the back of my neck.

I hadn't forgotten the way he looked without his shirt on, either, or the frequent thoughts I'd had about those muscular arms wrapping me up, tight and safe.

But really, there was nothing like a bloody nightmare starring your ex-fiance to kill your sex-drive.

I couldn't think about Caden like that right now.

I couldn't think about *anything* except that blade, dripping with blood...

He could tell I wasn't in the mood to even joke with him; his smile wilted a bit as he ran his hand soothingly along my arm and quietly asked, "What were you dreaming about?"

My gaze swept over the campsite, searching for a way to avoid telling him. It landed on his sword, sheathed and propped against his bags.

"I have an idea for a distraction," I said.

Fifteen minutes later, the two of us were in a small clearing just off our main campsite. We'd created a few makeshift torches to stick in the ground, to light the area and keep the beasts at bay. Once they were arranged, Caden walked back to me and offered me one of the two sizable, relatively straight and pruned tree limbs he'd acquired while setting out the torches.

He stood beside me, taking one hand and then reaching around so he could guide my other one as well. Once he was satisfied with the grip I had on my makeshift weapon, his hands moved to my hips and he squeezed and tugged, urging my legs further apart.

"Your feet should always be as close to shoulder-width apart as you can make them. Your balance is as important as your weapon." His voice was low, and I was glad; the others in our camp were still asleep, and I wanted to keep it that way.

I didn't want *four* of them asking me why I couldn't sleep.

Caden had dropped that conversation without a fuss, thankfully; he was as focused as Rhett on one of his books, suddenly, making a few more

adjustments at my feet and then reaching for my arms and bending them just so.

I was shaking—with fear left over from the dream, along with the new energy trembling through me at Caden's touch.

His touch was deliberate. It felt like he was worried about more than making sure my form was correct; he met each one of my anxious tremors with reassuring pressure against my skin.

"Relax into the stance," he murmured, "bend your elbows a little more. There—like that. How do you feel?"

"Kind of stupid. Kind of like I'm awkwardly holding a giant stick."

He laughed, taking a step back and surveying my awkwardness for himself. "Well, I'd be willing to do a lot of things for you, Rabbit," he said, "but letting your lovely, untrained self swing an *actual* sword at me is where I'm going to have to draw the line. You manage to beat me with the stupid giant stick, and then maybe we'll see about the next step."

"This shouldn't be too hard. That was basically my first reaction when I met you, you know—I *want to beat him with a giant stick*."

"A lot of people seem to have that initial reaction to me. I'm not really sure why."

"I can't imagine why either," I said drily.

"Well here's your chance to follow-through," he said with a crooked smile. "*If* you can actually manage to hit me, that is." He picked up his own stick, swinging it around as expertly as I'd watched him handle his sword. "Go ahead and try."

"You might regret inviting me to do that."

"Oh really?"

"I get a little...competitive sometimes. A little crazy."

"I would love to see you get a little crazy," he said in that shamelessly flirtatious tone of his.

I narrowed my eyes and mirrored his confident grin. I don't think I felt anywhere near as confident as him, but my body still relaxed into the stance he demonstrated for me, and there was something comforting in focusing so fully on my balance, my center...

I charged.

He sidestepped, and before I could even turn around I felt his stick pressing into my back. His hand was around my waist, pulling me against

his pretend-sword while he brought his mouth right up next to my ear and whispered, “Sorry, but you’re dead.”

I spun away and turned back to face him, determined to try again.

“Keep your weapon closer to your body,” he instructed. “And try to be more patient.”

I nodded. Took a deep breath. Feigned several steps toward him, trying unsuccessfully to make him flinch.

My second attempt to strike fell quickly and closely enough that he was forced to bring his own sword up to block it. It felt like a victory for maybe two seconds. And then his incredible strength pushed back against my weapon, causing me to stumble back until something caught me—the trunk of a tree.

Caden leaned closer, effectively pinning me between himself and the wide trunk, looking entirely too pleased with himself as he did.

“That was better,” he said. “But this is the part where I would pull out the dagger resting against my back...and so you’re dead again, unfortunately.”

“That *is* incredibly unfortunate.”

“But I might consider sparing you,” he said, “if you asked nicely.”

“How generous.”

He tilted his head even closer, so that his next words fell hot and heavy against the side of my cheek: “I can be very generous when I want to be—which doesn’t happen often, but who knows? Maybe you could get lucky.”

My breath caught, very obviously, in my throat.

He stepped back, his smile devious as he expertly tossed the stick back and forth between his hands. “Come on,” he encouraged. “Try again.”

With my heart hammering in my chest, I did—again and again I swung, jabbed, parried.

He was tireless, both in evading me and encouraging me to keep trying. He didn’t let me win, and I appreciated it.

The challenge was therapeutic.

I hadn’t been lying, though—I was competitive. I *hated* feeling like I wasn’t good at things, and it was hard not to feel incompetent as I watched him spin and twist easily away from my attacks.

After a few minutes of my increasingly sad attempts, I was out of breath and forced to transform my stick from a sword into a cane that I

could lean on.

“Giving up?” he asked, gently teasing.

“I’ve yet to land a hit,” I said wryly. “Obviously I need to pause and rethink my strategy.”

“If it helps, imagine me as whatever you were having that nightmare about.”

As soon as he said it, I couldn’t help actually doing it.

I placed a hand over my heart, remembering the blood, the hole in my heart, that cruel smile...

I was swinging again before I realized it.

All of the stress and fear and pain of the last few days was rising to the surface, surging through me as wild, desperate strength.

“Shit—okay, bad idea, *stop*.” After ducking and sidestepping a few more of my frantic attacks, Caden tossed his own stick aside and the grabbed for my wrists, gently but firmly pinning them behind my back and hugging himself against me until I stopped fighting him.

“Okay,” he said, in between attempts to catch his breath, “I think maybe you have some inner demons you need to talk through.”

“I don’t want to talk,” I said flatly.

He loosened his grip on my arms and slid around so we were face-to-face. “And I don’t want to get impaled by that stick you’re holding, or by whatever weapon happens to be within your reach when you finally snap completely.”

I tossed the stick aside, disgusted with myself for letting the thought of Bryce—or the Nightmarcher or whoever the hell he was—unhinge me so easily.

Even now, it felt like he was still controlling me.

“Sorry,” I said.

Caden took a deep, even breath. “What was that nightmare about, Rabbit?”

I could tell by the look on his face that he didn’t plan on dropping the conversation this time, so I sighed and said: “I keep have nightmares about him—about my ex-fiancé. And this time...this time the four of you were there too, I think. I couldn’t see clearly, but there were four kings. And there was a hole in my heart, and lots of blood.”

He listened with a quiet, considerate look as I rambled on, trying to make sense of what I’d seen, and when I’d finished he wandered over and

slumped down against one of the wide-trunked trees.

“No wonder you didn’t want to go back to sleep,” he said.

“He’s a part of this Nightmarcher guy that’s responsible for what’s happening to Wonderland, right? That means that in order to *save* Wonderland, I’m going to have to see him again. Not just in my dreams. In this last nightmare, he looked different in some ways, but his eyes were the same. And if I have to see those eyes in real life again, I...I...”

Caden beckoned me toward him. I walked over and knelt beside him, and he plucked an amethyst leaf from off the ground and trailed it absently up and down my arm as he said, “I’m looking forward to seeing him again myself.”

“You are?”

“Because I can’t wait to beat the absolute shit out of him for whatever he did to you.”

Whatever he did to you.

I flinched automatically at those words. Caden didn’t ask why. Didn’t ask for details. I was already shaking at the thought of what I could say.

He didn’t mention that shaking for once, either; he just quietly wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close, until my head was resting on his chest.

“There’s only one way a man should ever make a woman tremble,” he said after a moment lost in thought. “And it shouldn’t be from fear.”

I drew away from his chest just a few inches—just enough that I could peer up and see the way those dark blue eyes were studying me as if I was the last person in Wonderland.

My heart skipped several beats.

When it caught up again, light blossomed from my chest, and each beat made it pulse brighter and brighter—the brightest it had ever pulsed, maybe, which was exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

At least my bad dreams were all but forgotten for the moment.

All I wanted to think about were all the different ways this arrogant, beautiful king might manage to make me tremble.

He cupped a hand to the side of my cheek and kept my face tilted toward his as he softly said, “Also, for the record, you might have seen us in that dream, but we aren’t part of the nightmare. There are a lot of ways the mind can be tricked in this place, so just be sure you remember that, okay?”

I'd forgotten I'd even told him about that detail.

"I didn't think you were part of it," I said quietly.

But for some reason, hearing him deny it so eagerly made me wonder...

Could I honestly trust that these men wanted *me* as much as they wanted that magic buried inside of my heart?

What would happen to me once that Heartstone was free and resting in its proper place in the Crown of Five Jewels?

The light between us wavered a bit, but flared brighter still when one of his hands slid beneath my shirt, beneath my armor, searching until he found the bare skin of my lower back. His fingers traced a trail along my spine. Gentle at first, until a wave of pleasure overwhelmed me and made me inhale sharply, and his touch became deeper, more possessive, in response.

The trees whispered around us.

A gravelly howl sounded in the distance, followed by the sound of snapping limbs.

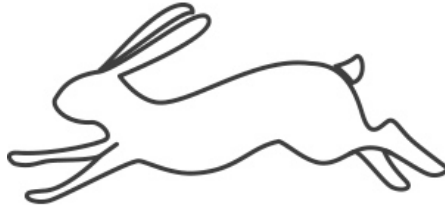
I broke, reluctantly, out of the trance Caden's touch was putting me under.

"Is something moving out there?"

He didn't answer. His lips were against my neck, and he seemed determined not to let the moment be interrupted by anything—

At least until a giant beast crashed into the clearing and turned its glowing red eyes in our direction.

CHAPTER 15



In Which I Play With Fire

Without a word, Caden grabbed my hand and yanked me to my feet.

He kept his fingers tightly intertwined with mine as we sprinted for camp.

The others were already awake. Adrian drew a pair of double blades as we approached, and Emory was ready to catch me as Caden shoved me toward him and raced to grab his weapon.

“So much for *the light should keep them away*, huh?” Caden yelled to Rhett as he drew his sword from its sheath.

Rhett ignored him, busy conjuring a swath of flame. He flung it at the bramblesnatch that had followed Caden and me, igniting the ground and building a wall that the creature snapped viciously at, but which it ultimately didn’t dare to pass through.

But three more had already emerged from the woods surrounding our camp, and these three had riders on their back—knights dressed in black armor and wearing long, pale grey masks that looked like they had been melted and shaped to their boney faces.

“Caden is right,” Emory said, pulling me further away from the battle, ducking us both behind a tangled mess of bushes with dark leaves and some sort of snow-white berries. “This isn’t normal behavior. They’re being commanded to attack. And those knights...”

“I’ve seen that emblem before,” I said, pointing to the closest one; a flicker of Rhett’s fire had caught it at just the right angle, revealing that symbol of the upside-down heart wrapped in thorns.

“You have?”

“I just had a nightmare about it, actually.”

He looked shocked at my apparently prophetic dreams for a moment, then nodded. “It’s the Nightmarcher’s emblem.”

“I thought he wasn’t supposed to be able to find me? That spell that Rhett performed, and all the precautions we took...”

Emory frowned. “Something apparently gave us away.”

The realization of what that *something* could be hit me quickly. “Do you think they could have tracked the Heartstone’s energy?”

He considered it for a moment, grim acceptance slowly spreading across his face. “It’s possible.”

It had flared brighter than ever before when I was with Caden, and apparently this was the price we were paying for that moment of intimacy.

“What do we do?” I asked, trying not to let the panic slip into my voice—which was hard not to do, considering the scene in front of us.

Adrian was swinging both his blades so fast that he was little more than a blur.

Caden cut ankle after ankle of the creatures diving for him, fearlessly charging toward them and darting around swiping claws and snapping fangs.

Rhett was circling, sending fire in every direction. The creatures who didn’t manage to dance away from the fire ignited quickly with the faintest spark, and the night was filled with smoke and the sound of their yelps as they rolled frantically over the ground, trying to put themselves out, oblivious to the way they were crushing the black knights who rode them.

The three kings were a breathtaking display of power and grace—but I wasn’t sure it was going to be enough, and I could tell Emory felt the same way.

His tone was grim as he said, “Fire is an obvious weakness, maybe Rhett...”

He trailed off.

Because it was a weakness, but it was also obvious that the monarch of the Fire Kingdom was growing tired. His magic wasn’t infinite, even though our enemies seemed to be.

“I’m going to take you somewhere safer,” Emory said, eyeing our tied horses who were tossing their heads and prancing nervously. “We may be able to outrun them. There’s a river we could—”

“No.”

I felt as surprised as he looked, but I didn’t back down from the sudden crazy determination I felt coursing through me.

“No,” I repeated. “We need all of us if we’re going to save Wonderland, right? All four jewels. So...No. I’m not leaving them behind to die.” My chest pounded as I said the words.

Not with fear.

Not with desire.

But with *power*.

It was an entirely new sensation that shot through my veins, starting as heat rising in my chest before racing through me, all the way out to tips of my fingers—I felt like I could start throwing fire, same as Rhett.

Rhett.

He was down on one knee, breathing hard. The other two kings were backing their way toward him, the sheer number of beasts attacking us finally overwhelming them.

I started to run.

Emory grabbed my arm and jerked me back.

“Let go!”

“I don’t think so.”

“Now!”

“Alex—”

That burning in my chest erupted into a brilliant red flash between us, so bright that he stumbled back.

He was off-balance for only a second,

It was all I needed to escape him.

I ran so fast that I’d lost the feeling in my feet by the time I collided with Rhett. And I literally *collided* with him, tripping over a rock I didn’t see coming and flailing straight into his arms, painfully twisting my ankle in the process.

So, not exactly the impressive, daring rush to the rescue I’d been hoping to achieve.

I could feel the weariness in his muscles as he caught me and just barely kept me from face planting the ground.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded, voice cracking from that weariness, and his eyes widening at the fear of seeing me here, so

close to the bared teeth of those beasts and the swords of their silent riders.

“I’m going to help,” I panted.

“*Help?*”

“Summon more fire.”

“Alex, I don’t think I can keep—”

“You *idiot*,” Caden said, grabbing my arm, “you and Emory should have escaped by now!”

I yanked free and stubbornly wrapped my arms around Rhett, clutching my hands into his shirt and pulling myself against him.

I had an idea, and I was *not* going anywhere until I saw it through.

“Magic! NOW” I shouted, burying my face into his back. As I did, I felt that same power from before rising up through me. I focused all of my energy on transferring it to the king I was clinging desperately to.

It worked.

Together we were an explosion of heat and power, of towers of flames that set several of the thorny creatures on fire and sent the ones behind them whining and scampering for cover.

Caden chased after them, striking down their riders as they fell.

“How did you do that?” Rhett whispered to me, awestruck.

“I... I’m not sure.”

All I knew was that my ankle hurt like hell, I was suddenly so exhausted I could barely stand, and my vision was starting to blur.

The blurry beast closest to us was completely engulfed in flames. It bucked widely, throwing the knight from its back and then rolling across the ground. Rhett scooped me into his arms and leapt out of the path of its burning body.

The dismounted knight was already on his feet, sword drawn. As Rhett tried to set me back on my feet, that knight swung toward us, fury and power and rage—

It met Adrian’s blade, striking it hard enough that I swear I could feel the reverberations of steel in the air, palpable waves that washed over us and that probably would have knocked me over if not for the grip Rhett had on my arm.

“Get her out of here,” Adrian said, teeth clenched as he pushed back against the blade trying to force him to the ground. The knight was big—

too big to be human under all of that armor—but somehow Adrian was pushing him away from me.

But a second knight was coming to the first one's aid, and then a third—and I was sure that the king couldn't possibly be strong enough to fight them *all*.

Rhett was obeying his command all the same, dragging me from the battle.

"We have to help him!" I shouted.

"We have to make sure you're safe," Rhett replied in a much calmer voice. "We can figure out the rest after that."

"I can help him!"

His grip on me only tightened. "You've done enough. There's no telling the actual toll your stunt just now took on your body."

I wanted to keep arguing, but he was a lot stronger than me—especially since that exhaustion from before was getting worse.

My body was heavy and useless, and I felt close to blacking out.

Every time I blinked I lost seconds, minutes, maybe.

At some point, I opened my eyes and found that we'd made it deeper in the woods, far away from the sounds of battle.

Emory and Caden were there a moment later, leading three of our horses. One of them was Bodhi, but his rider was nowhere in sight.

My stomach dropped.

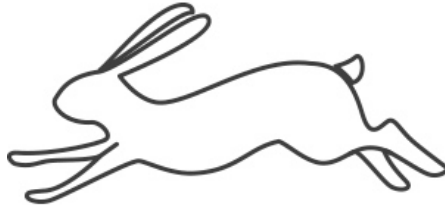
"Where is Adrian?" I demanded.

"Hopefully still distracting those beasts," Caden said, grimly. "Come on. You're with me." He swung onto Bodhi's back and motioned for Emory and Rhett to lift me up to him.

It happened so quick, and I still felt so weak, that before I knew it I was on the horse's back and Caden was wrapping an arm around my waist.

The last thing I remember was hearing myself slur out the words *we can't leave him*, and Caden answering only by hugging me tighter against him and kicking our horse into a gallop.

CHAPTER 16



In Which We Start to Play a Game

“We had a deal. Her safety comes first. Always.”

“He could be dead. You saw how many he was trying to lead away—”

“I doubt he was counting. He would rather die than see her harmed.”

“Well so would I, but still...”

I laid quietly, a short distance away from the fire at our new campsite, listening to the three remaining kings of Wonderland discussing yet another *deal* they’d made about me.

Her safety comes first.

While I pretended to sleep, they’d all said this, repeatedly, in some way or another, and I didn’t know how I felt about it.

On the one hand, I’d never felt so protected or loved. This kind of devotion was foreign to me after years spent with my manipulative asshole ex—and for it to be coming from four different men—no, *kings*...

I mean, I couldn’t really complain, right?

And yet, if that devotion had gotten one of those kings killed...

I clenched my hands into fists. Tucked my chin down to my chest, trying to stifle the quiet sob rising up through me.

“Besides, if he’s dead, not really much we can do for him, right? I mean, that’s pretty much that.” Caden’s tone was a grim attempt at humor.

I stuffed the sleeve of my cloak into my mouth to muffle the sound of my crying. I thought of those moments spent on horseback with Adrian, of that almost-smile he’d given me and that almost-breakthrough we’d been on the cusp of.

“Are you okay?” Rhett’s voice was suddenly much closer, and a moment later he appeared, crouching down next to me and smoothing a hand through my hair.

The conversation by the fire had stopped as well; I could feel Emory and Caden staring in my direction, and I was suddenly incredibly self-conscious; exactly how loud had I been crying?

It was too much to think about all of them right now—all their devotion, all their combined concern for me—so as I sat up I kept my eyes locked only on Rhett’s calm blue ones.

“I’m...” I sucked in a deep breath, determined not to let any more sobs escape. “I’m just a little overwhelmed, is all.”

He nodded. Studied me for a moment, as if trying to decide what to say. “There’s blood on your face,” he said. “And smoke, too—here, let me get it.”

“I’m not even sure how that blood got there.”

“Me either.” He finished smudging some of the mess from my skin and leaned back, his brows knitting together in thought. “I’m sorry, Alex,” he said, softly.

“Sorry?”

“None of that should have happened.”

“It’s not your fault,” I insisted. “And if you hadn’t burned those creatures, none of us would be here at the moment, I’m guessing.”

“Nevermind what *I* did. I thought I was a goner before you showed up. I’m still in awe of you and what you did, you know.”

I was speechless for a moment.

How exactly was one supposed to respond when such a smart, gorgeous man told her that he was *in awe* of her?

He didn’t seem to expect a response, at least; he tilted his head back and studied the black sky for a moment before muttering, “I can’t figure out how the spell I used on you could have come undone so quickly.”

“*Undone*,” I repeated, lifting my metal canteen and studying my reflection in it. “That’s a good word to describe me at the moment.”

“But still gorgeous,” he countered, lowering his gaze back to me.

“Eh, debatable.”

“I’m afraid it’s not,” he said. Then he took my hand and rubbed a thumb across my wrist and added, “Your skin is like ice all over. Why don’t you come warm yourself by the fire?”

When I hesitated, his smile turned sly.

“I’m afraid going to be accused of hogging Wonderland’s queen over here,” he said.

“Right. Gotta share and all that. I keep forgetting...”

“Are you warming up to the idea at all?” he asked, clearly trying to direct the conversation to something other than the blood on my face.

I opened my mouth, prepared to say *No, it’s never going to not seem strange*.

Then I realized how my heart ached at the possibility of Adrian being gone for good, and of how incomplete our camp felt now that he wasn’t here.

I think I *had* been getting used to having all four of them by my side. The thought of me plus *them*, instead of just me plus *him*, had somehow become natural without me even trying to force it.

And I felt miserable all over again at the thought of any part of my ‘them’ being lost.

“Do you think Adrian is...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say the word ‘dead’.

“Do you think he’s really going to catch up with us?” I asked instead.

Rhett hesitated a moment; I hadn’t answered his question, after all. His tone held its usual measured, thoughtful cadence when he replied with, “I’ve known Adrian for a long time. We studied together for awhile, you know—his father shipped him off to one of the academies in the Fire Kingdom for awhile when he was younger. That’s where we first met, although we had corresponded for years before that.”

“You had?”

“It wasn’t really the way of things when our parents were ruling, but I think Adrian has always wanted a more unified Wonderland—one with solid alliances between the kingdoms, if nothing else.”

“You can’t get much more unified than four kings sharing one queen,” I said with a snort. And then I immediately found myself blushing at the thought.

Rhett was quiet; he might have been blushing as well, but I was staring hard at the ground and I didn’t plan on looking up until that fire in my cheeks subsided.

“Anyway,” I continued in a rush, “that makes sense. He told me he was willing to do whatever he had to in order to save this world. Guess

that desire started early.”

“I don’t doubt the truth of that for a second,” Rhett said. “He was always ruthless when it came to goals he’d set. Which is why—to answer your question—no, I don’t think Adrian is dead. I think Death would have to try a great deal harder to stop him from living to see Wonderland united and at peace.”

I nodded slowly, wishing I could accept the words as facts.

Rhett always sounded so confident.

“Now,” he said, “back to that plan of warming up by the fire...”

I stood, and as the pile of blankets fell off me I realized that the ankle I’d twisted had apparently been wrapped up while I slept. It still smarted a bit when I put pressure on it, but it wasn’t as unbearable as before.

“Emory’s doing,” Rhett explained, offering me a hand to steady myself with as we walked over to the fire. He kept his fingers lightly intertwined with mine even after we’d sat down.

“Tea?” Caden asked as I sat down, giving me a knowing little grin.

“Pass. As always,” I replied.

“One of these days, we’ll win you over,” he insisted.

I returned a slight smile of my own. “Well now I have to continue to resist, just out of principle.”

“Stubborn to a fault,” he chuckled, taking another sip from the cup in his own hand. It was slightly chipped, but it was still nicer looking than any dish I’d ever owned. I hadn’t seen them packing it, but of course they had made sure to pack the fancy tea set.

If I had to write a list of their top three priorities, it would probably be something like—

1. Me

2. This whole war against the Nightmarcher business

3. Tea

—And to be honest I wasn’t always sure what the exact order of things was.

“So Caden and I have just been talking,” Emory said, looking uncharacteristically solemn, “and I think you might be right about what

you said before, about the Heartstone's light attracting attention to you in spite of Rhett's spell dust."

"Oh?"

"Caden said the two of you were getting...*close* when those knights found us."

I was blushing again, suddenly.

"Don't worry, I left out the good parts," Caden said with a flirty wink, "they can stay our dirty little secrets."

"We didn't really *do* anything," I reminded him.

"True. But imagine if we had gone any further before getting interrupted," he said, clapping his hands behind his head and leaning back. "The Heartstone probably would have exploded or something."

Emory cleared his throat. "The stone *did* have a reaction, is the point. Not an explosion, but it was apparently enough that the energy of it drew unwanted attention to us. And that particular energy can't be hidden by other spells, it seems."

"So what does that mean?" Rhett asked. "How can we stop it from giving off that traceable energy?" His grip on my hand tightened.

Emory stared at that silently possessive grip on me as he said, "Well, I don't think we *can* control the stone, or expect Alex to—not yet. So we'll just have to control ourselves instead."

"What, like a no-touching-each-other rule?" I asked, somewhat jokingly.

Emory nodded. "More or less."

"Which for the record, I'm against," Caden said. "At least as much as you can be against something and still agree that it's probably a good idea."

"Maybe it is," I agreed slowly.

I hadn't forgotten that exhaustion that had overwhelmed me when I'd used the stone to magnify Rhett's magic. It was exhausting in general, carrying this unpredictable power around. The less stimulation I gave it, the better things would be all around, probably.

But Rhett still hadn't let go of my hand—and I didn't want him to.

As tiring as that magic and my connection to all of the kings was, there was something addicting about it, too.

After a few minutes of sitting quietly in our circle around the fire, listening to Caden and Emory argue in whispered tones about what our

next move should be, I managed to beat my addiction for long enough that my hand slipped out of Rhett's.

He didn't comment. Just kept staring intently into the smoldering fire. Our bodies remained close enough that a heavy breath could have pressed our skin together once again.

Close enough to tempt.

And he *was* tempting. Now that I couldn't touch, I couldn't help but at least *look*. The right sleeve of his shirt was in tatters. He'd rolled it up in response, accenting the subtle ripples of muscle and the fresh scar that now ran up past his elbow and disappeared underneath his clothes. Other than that scar—and the faintest shadow of stubble on his jaw—he looked as casually put-together as always.

He must have felt me staring, because a smile as easy as the rest of his appearance slowly began to spread across his face.

I averted my eyes.

The trees were a dozen different shades of blue and silver, and the sandy white ground added to the alien feel of our surroundings. A lunar landscape, almost. The strange quiet reinforced that feeling. The trees didn't whisper, no birds sang, nothing except the flames of our campfire moved.

We might as well have been in the vacuum of space.

Then the distant clip clop of hooves interrupted the silence.

I was on my feet immediately, turning toward the sound.

Caden's brown mare trotted into view a moment later. Adrian was upright on her back—though barely. The right side of his face was bloody. His arm was curled around his stomach and he had his other hand braced between the horse's shoulder blades.

Emotion—and then power, dangerous power—swelled in my chest. I slowed to a stop before that tell-tale light of magic could surface, and I looked away and tried to catch my breath in between hammering heartbeats.

How in the world was I going to keep this magic under control around them?

I hovered in the background as Emory and Rhett helped Adrian down and started to tend to his wounds. But I was close enough that, when Adrian came to his senses and found the strength to speak, I heard the very first thing he said—

“Where is she?”

“She’s here,” Emory assured him.

“Is she alright?”

I took another deep, stabilizing breath and then stepped to where he could see me.

“I’m fine,” I said, softly.

The Sun King blinked several times before sighing with relief and closing his eyes.

Emory and Rhett continued to doctor him, while I helped Caden tend to the mare. He showed me the proper way to brush down a horse, to clean hooves and help cool the animal down, and I hung on to every word because it helped me not think about Adrian.

About how he hadn’t hesitated to step between me and those monsters.

About how the only thing he’d seemed worried about when he finally reached us was...me.

“Alex?” Emory’s sudden voice pulled me out of my thoughts. He was frowning as he approached Caden and me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Adrian wants to see you.” He didn’t elaborate past that, but I understood the grim face to mean that he wasn’t convinced that I could keep my emotions—and the Heartstone linked to them—in check.

I wasn’t either, really.

I braced myself for the reunion and walked over to Adrian anyway.

He looked like he was sleeping, lying on his back, his chest rising and falling painfully slowly. He appeared half dead, and yet somehow managed to look regal and imposing all the same.

I tentatively reached out a hand and touched his wrist—just enough to let him know I was there before I drew back.

His eyes opened for a moment, took in the sight of me and then closed again. “Alexandra.”

He said my name like an affirmation.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

He was quiet for a minute, and then, “You can stay close to me while I sleep.”

It sounded like a command, just like it always did with him.

But it wasn’t annoyance that made me recoil this time.

“I—I would, but the rest of us were talking, and we kind of decided that, um...”

“I know what you discussed,” he said. “But I don’t have to touch you. I just like knowing that you’re nearby. That you’re safe.” His hand reached toward mine, but, true to his word, he didn’t quite touch me. “And I want you to be the first thing I see when I wake up,” he added in a sleepy little voice.

It had to be the meds that Emory had given him, because that soft voice, those words...it didn’t seem like Adrian. He clearly wasn’t himself, and I didn’t feel right leaving his side when he was like this. He wouldn’t have left mine—I had no doubt about that at this point.

“Okay,” I agreed. “But you’re going to have to share one of those blankets. It’s too far from the fire over here.”

“Take it,” he insisted. “I’m burning up anyway.” I could tell that it took an enormous amount of effort on his part, but he propped himself up far enough that he was able to pull a blanket from his makeshift bed and then drape it over me. Then he took another blanket and folded it into a pillow for me. He insisted I make myself comfortable before he even considered arranging any of the blankets around himself.

He became quiet and still quickly after we were settled in, drifting off while I studied the stitched emblem on the collar of his shirt—two crossed swords, with a heart floating both above and below the crossed point.

After five minutes or so, I was pretty sure he was asleep, but I still couldn’t help but quietly say, “Thank you, by the way. If you hadn’t intervened back there...”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said after a moment, his eyes still closed and his breathing slow and even.

“You could have died.”

“You could have as well—and making sure that doesn’t happen is more important to me.”

I wrapped my blanket more tightly around myself. “I’m not sure how I would have handled you dying for me, honestly. It freaks me out.”

He slowly blinked his eyes open. “Is it really so hard to believe you’re worth dying for?”

“Um...Yes?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess my self-esteem just isn’t quite *that* high.”

His hand moved, only to clench into a fist and pull back—fighting the urge to reach for me again—as he said, “I would explain *why* you’re worth it if I thought I could.”

“Try,” I insisted, drowsiness slipping into my own voice now.

He thought for a moment before saying, “Let’s see. You agreed to try and save this world that—as you yourself pointed out—you didn’t even know existed until a week ago. Earlier, you foolishly ran toward Rhett without thinking. You’re stubborn. Reckless. Strong—”

“This is a strange mixture of flattery and insults.”

“—exceptionally smart and infuriatingly beautiful.”

I blushed. “Well... that’s a little better.”

“Not to mention the magic you carry. Something about that light between us...Every time it touches me, I feel as if I am remembering a lifetime with you. I don’t fully understand it, but I can no longer imagine a world without you in it. I don’t even want to *try* to think about that.”

More warmth flooded through me. I made a conscious effort to guard my heart against it, to keep the magic in me from reacting. We definitely couldn’t afford to draw any more danger toward us at the moment.

“You’re being much more romantic and tolerable than usual,” I commented.

“And to think, all it took for a change of character was a near-death experience.”

I settled down in the blankets again, turning so I could look him dead in the eyes. “No more of that. I’d rather you just stay bossy and intolerable.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You better.”

“Who’s being bossy now, hm?”

“You did say you wanted a queen, didn’t you?”

“Famous last words.”

“And as long as I’m giving you orders: I command you to get some rest. Now.”

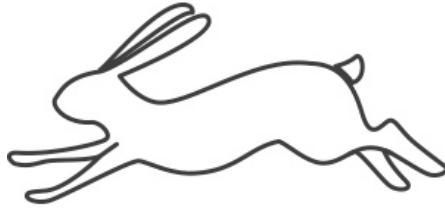
“Yes, your majesty,” he said, one of his rare smiles starting to turn up the corners of his lips.

I closed my eyes, pretended I was ready to sleep so that I didn’t have to look at that devastatingly handsome smile.

“Goodnight, my queen,” I heard him whisper after a minute.

We fell asleep facing each other, hands outstretched, knees curled up close, but nothing quite touching.

CHAPTER 17



In Which We Play Another Game That's Even Less Fun

I woke up alone.

My heart was pounding. A faint rose-colored haze surrounded me.

At first, I thought it was another dream—but a dozen pinches did nothing to wake me up. Grabbing one of the canteens from my bag and splashing water in my face didn't do the trick either; it just left me wet and shaking from a combination of cold and terror.

The campsite was completely deserted, but there was no sign of any sort of struggle. No sign that the kings had ever been there at all—except, of course, for that light glowing around me.

Did Adrian and I do something I don't remember? I wondered.

"It's as if they just decided to pack up and leave you," said a sudden voice.

I spun around and saw Lewis sauntering toward me, his bushy tail swishing lazily back and forth.

"They wouldn't have done that," I said, fear seizing at my breath and making the words rush together. "They can't have."

"Of course not," he drawled. "So perhaps they were never really here at all? Do you suppose that's possible?"

"Don't start speaking in riddles please," I said. "I'm not in the mood."

"That's a shame." He grinned that manic grin that showed off all his sharp little teeth. "Because she *loves* them."

Before I could ask who he meant by *she*, the sound of bells filled the air, and the silver tree-trunks closest to me began to ripple until the bark turned into a reflective surface.

Lady Midday stepped out of one of those mirror-trees a moment later. I stumbled backward, nearly tripping over my blankets in the process.

“No need to look so concerned, Alex dear,” she said. “I’m here to help.”

“What is going on?”

Her many bracelets jangled loudly as she gestured toward my chest, toward the light that was still softly shining around it. “The Heartstone appears to be waking up in a rather... *convincing* manner, doesn’t it?”

Her smile was mischievous, and I felt a little bit like a teenager who’d just been caught having sex with her boyfriend—even though I still didn’t actually remember *doing* anything with Adrian.

“It seems to have a sensitive trigger,” I said, frowning. “I feel the magic stirring practically every time one of the kings *looks* at me.”

“That’s good news, isn’t it? You’re growing close to Wonderland’s kings, as Alice once was.”

“Good news, except that it’s making it impossible to go unnoticed. There’s going to be an entire army waiting for us at the ruins of Alice’s castle, at this rate.”

“Ah, yes.” Her eyes swept over the empty campsite. “And that explains why you’re alone.”

“It does?”

“Clearly your dear kings have been attacked by members of said army.”

I grabbed my cloak and wrapped it around myself. I thought about looking for a sword as well, but I’d only had like, what? One lesson? Let’s be realistic here: I’d probably just end up tripping and impaling myself on it.

I found that bird pin that Mama Su had attached to my cloak, and I squeezed it tightly as I asked, “Attacked by what?”

Lewis sniffed casually at the air. “Blood-raths, smells like,” he yawned.

“What the hell is a blood-rath?”

Neither of them answered me right away.

Lewis rolled onto his back and pawed at the air as if playing with an invisible ball of yarn.

Lady Midday turned toward the tree she'd stepped out of. With a flourish of her hands, a trail of dark red suddenly appeared beneath that tree; it looked as if the ground was oozing blood up into the shape of a neatly outlined path.

That path wound away from the tree trunk, heading deep into the forest.

"Nasty little creatures, they are," Lady Midday said, her lips still oddly close to that playful smile—as if this was all a game to her.

Maybe it was.

"They're very fond of riddles and mazes and leading unsuspecting travelers to their death."

"Fucking fantastic," I mumbled, stepping cautiously toward that red path. It was like a saturated sponge; when I stepped on it, more scarlet liquid bubbled up around my ankles.

Gross.

"I'd move quicker if I were you," Lady Midday called in a singsong voice.

Before I could ask *why*, I saw movement in the distant trees—said trees were forming a circle, I could have sworn. And I felt a tugging in my chest, as if something had hooked there and I was being reeled toward that circle.

I wasn't entirely sure *why*, but I followed the red path.

I tried to pretend it was just regular mud splashing up my legs, instead of something that looked like blood and smelled suspiciously metallic; I was afraid that if I stopped using it, the path might disappear altogether and then god only knows where in Wonderland I'd end up.

That circle of trees kept shifting.

I kept running toward it anyway, until the forest grew so suddenly dense that moving through it was impossible. I staggered back, turned around, and saw that my earlier fear had already come true—the red path was gone.

The trees creaked and groaned with a gust of wind, and as they settled I thought I heard the sound of giggling. I spun in a circle, searching for—and not finding—Lady Midday or anyone else.

"Where am I supposed to go now?" I wondered aloud.

“Toward the light, naturally,” Lewis said, plodding to my side.

I looked in the direction he was staring in, and then to the left, the right, behind us...

There was no obvious glow of any sort; if anything, it all seemed to be getting *darker*.

“What light?” I demanded.

“Are you blind?”

“No, but I’m not a cat, so obviously I see things differently than you.” I knelt beside him, reaching once more for that jubjub pin on my cloak as I remembered Mama Su’s advice. “Don’t be an asshole for once, how about? Help me, please?”

“Hmph.”

“Who’s side are you on, anyway?” I asked, exasperated.

“Yours, at the moment. Just glance over here—there, you see? I’m right here at *your* side, you stupid girl.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Speak more clearly then.”

“I *clearly* meant that you seem to have better night vision than me, so tell me what you see.”

He sighed an exaggerated sigh, then swept his tail back and forth several times before using it to point to my left—where, in the distance, a soft white glow could now be seen leaking through the spaces in the foliage.

“Okay, that wasn’t there before.”

“But it is *now*, and that’s the important thing, isn’t it?”

I swallowed my frustration with this world and its whims down, and I made my way toward the light. I made sure not to blink or give it any other chance to escape my sight.

The glow turned out to be from a phosphorescent rock. It was in the center of a clearing that was encircled by trees, and in between the trees were four doors, each one evenly suspended in the air and looking as perfectly natural as a random door in the middle of the forest could look.

I heard giggling again.

It echoed eerily in the night air. I looked around for the source, and again I found nothing. When I turned my attention back to the doors, I saw that a tiny window had appeared in the center of each one.

I sprinted toward the closest door and peered through it.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

Through the glass, I saw an entirely different world: a sky of red, a blazing sun burning over a shoreline with waves crashing higher and higher.

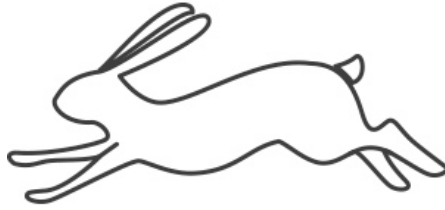
Lying in the white sand was Emory.

I might have thought he was sleeping—if not for the unnaturally pale tone of his skin, and the way he didn't stir even when the water broke over his body.

No, he wasn't sleeping.

He looked like he was dead.

CHAPTER 18



In Which I Hit a Homerun, Discover a Key, and Break Some Stuff, All in a Very Queenlike Fashion

My hand reached for the doorknob, but before my fingers even brushed it, a small creature zipped out of nowhere and slammed against my chest.

“NO TOUCHING!” it shrieked at me.

I swatted wildly. Missed every time, and the creature continued to buzz and shriek until I was forced to take a step back.

It fluttered into my face, golden eyes glaring. It looked a bit like a fairy I’d seen in a book once—or maybe how that fairy might look after it joined a gang and got hooked on steroids. Leathery wings, scarred skin tight with muscle, and a nasty smile to wrap it all up.

“You touch, you regret,” it said. I didn’t know it was possible to make a giggle sound menacing, but this impish little thing managed it.

I stood my ground, swatting until it fluttered back a few feet. “How do I get them out if I can’t touch the door?”

It flashed its sharp yellow teeth at me in response.

“He’s going to drown!”

“And the other kings too!” it squealed, turning several somersaults in the air and gesturing at the other three doors.

“Would you like for me to eat this annoying little creature?” Lewis offered.

“Tempting, but not yet.” I took a deep breath. “Because this bitch-fairy is *going* to tell me how to get them out from behind those doors.”

“It’s called a *trollixie*,” he informed me.

“I’m sticking with bitch-fairy. Now,” I said, turning back to said bitchy creature, “tell me what I have to do.”

The answer came from somewhere behind me: “You choose one, and you concentrate on saving him, and the door will open for you.”

I twisted around to face the source of the new voice. Another fluttering creature, this one with eyes that had entirely too much white around the pale green irises.

“Just like that?” I asked.

A third bitch-fairy appeared. “She’s caught on, hasn’t she?” it snickered. “Nothing is *just like that* in Wonderland.”

I considered their words—and all the ways they could be interpreted and twisted. “You said *choose one*.”

“To start with,” said the white-eyed fairy. “But of course, if you open one, it will send the blood-raths into a frenzy, won’t it?” She smiled as red paths flared up, crisscrossing the ground all around me. “And they’ll want to break the other doors down and devour what’s inside. Maybe we can stop them, but maybe not. They’re devilishly quick when they want to be.”

I felt dizzy, suddenly.

“So I can only *definitely* save one,” I whispered. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Better than none, isn’t it? And you can choose whichever you want. Surely you have a preference?”

Two more fairies appeared. The five of them flitted around the clearing, laughing and swooping about while I contemplated the impossible situation before me.

The one with the white eyes paused and hovered in front of me, leathery wings rising and falling with slow, loud flaps. “We’ve each created a door, and we’re eager to see which one of our creations you pick.”

I shook my head in frustration. I wasn’t supposed to have to choose. I *couldn’t* choose.

“And what if I command you to open *all* the doors at once?” I asked. The fairy laughed. “Who are you to *command* me to do anything?”

“I’m the queen of Wonderland.”

I mean, it was worth a shot, right?—even if just made her laugh louder.

“I see no crown,” she said. “No crowned kings at your side to make you even seem royal by association.”

“I don’t need a king to reign as queen,” I snapped. And it might have been true—technically. But my heart was beating a different story.

I needed Emory to calm me down.

I needed Caden to make me laugh.

I needed Rhett to make me see reason.

I needed Adrian to remind me that I was strong, even though I didn’t feel like it at the moment.

I needed *all* of them, and I wasn’t leaving this forest without them. There was a solution, there had to be, if I just looked closer...

“You said *each* of you created a door.”

She grinned wildly. “Yes.”

I counted each of their fluttering bodies several times over before I said, “There are five of you.”

The white-eyed fairy’s grin twitched.

“There are only four doors. Where is the fifth?”

Her face turned a bright, angry shade of red, and my confidence surged—I was on to something.

I grabbed a rock and flung it at the nearest door.

It went straight through.

They were shrieking at me again, but I didn’t stop this time; I just kept grabbing rocks and sticks and flinging them at each of the doors, and watching triumphantly as everything soared straight through.

“None of these doors are real,” I said. “That’s why you didn’t want me to touch them.”

The shrieking stopped. The fluttering stopped, too, and suddenly all of the little bitch-fairies wore the same identical angry looks, their skin flushed the same warning shade of crimson.

They were small enough that I could crush them in my fist if I could get ahold of them, probably. But there were *five* of them. And those nasty rows of teeth looked perfectly capable of picking me apart, chunk by fleshy chunk.

Without taking my eyes off of the group of them, I bent down and picked up a fallen tree limb.

I’d played softball as a teen, and yeah, I was a better pitcher than hitter— but hell if I wasn’t about to try for five homeruns in a row.

The first one dove.

Swing and a miss.

I did better on the second attack—managing a glancing blow that sent the creature skittering through the air until it crashed into a tree and slumped down the trunk.

The third streaked toward me in the same instant that Lewis leapt onto my shoulder. The Cheshire cat let out a hiss, and the fairy pulled abruptly out of its attack and circled back to the others.

All of their eyes focused warily on the cat as he wrapped himself more firmly around my neck, like a fat, fluffy boa.

“Behind you,” he said.

I chanced a glance over my shoulder and saw that a new door had appeared.

“So you’ve decided to be helpful?” I asked, patting him on the head and eliciting an irritable purr in response.

“Only because I’m hungry.” He shook his head away from my touch. “So can I eat them now?” he asked.

“By all means,” I replied, turning and racing for the new door as he jumped away from me.

A yowl and a shriek split through the air a second later. I didn’t turn around, but I guessed that meant one less bitch-fairy for me to deal with—after I dealt with this door.

Which turned out to be locked.

Of fucking course it is.

“You’ve found the true door,” said the white-eyed fairy. “Well done. And of course you have the key too, so...”

“Key?” I repeated, looking back.

“Oh? You don’t have it?” She folded her arms across her chest and triumphantly lifted her pointy chin. “Shame.”

“*Shame*,” the other remaining two tittered in agreement.

Lewis reappeared, finished with the snack he’d been enjoying in the shadows. Blood stained his purple fur. He wiggled his way between me and the fairies, and they floated back a few feet at the sight of that stained fur.

My hand clenched around the doorknob. Slipped a little lower, feeling for clues while still watching the fairies out of the corner of my eye.

And within seconds, I found what I was looking for.

The lock was heart-shaped.

My other hand reached for my own heart. It was dangerous, I knew, but what other choice did I have? I was determined to finish this like a queen, even if I didn't yet have a crown. If I was the key to saving Wonderland, then I could be the key to opening this door.

There was no window on it, but I found it surprisingly easy to see the kings—*my* kings—in my mind.

And as I pictured them, light pooled around my chest.

A panicked thought of what sort of evil that light might attract almost derailed me, but I pushed through and managed to focus that light, that power; it snaked toward my arm, down to my hand and peeled off until it completely filled that heart-shaped lock.

Several metallic *pings* sounded, followed swiftly by irritated screeches so loud I had to put my hands over my ears. The fairies could shriek all they wanted to, though—because that light was spreading, spider-webbing through the door and splintering it.

I watched as shard after shard of wood peeled apart and fell at my feet, revealing a rectangular patch of hazy blue—a portal.

I'd already jumped down a rabbit hole, so this was nothing, right?

There was no fall this time, at least; I stepped lightly to the other side, and I found myself facing a labyrinth similar to the one outside Adrian's palace. I remembered Lewis's advice for finding my way through that maze, and I followed it again, setting a destination in my mind and turning left over and over again without once doubting that I would reach what I needed.

And then suddenly there they were, all four of them sleeping peacefully beneath a tree with curly limbs and pale purple blossoms.

I was so overwhelmed for a moment that I couldn't speak.

I still hadn't found my voice by the time I reached them. My magic lingered, floating around me, thin light that brushed across Emory's face first.

He blinked his eyes open and stared at me in confusion.

"What is going on? Where are we?" He stood and closed the space between us, taking my face in his hands so he could study it, pushing the strands of my hair aside and searching for cuts and bruises. "Are you okay?"

The others began to stir as I nodded and laid my hand over Emory's, pressing his touch more firmly into my skin until I was convinced that it was real. That I hadn't lost it.

As the others circled around us, Emory held me steady, and I tried to explain what had happened.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Adrian asked once I'd finished rambling. That stern, expectant tone of his made it impossible to lie, to pretend I wasn't still a little rattled.

"I'll be better once we get away from this forest and everything in it that wants to kill us," I said.

"Agreed," Rhett said. "Although this incident feels less like it was a true attack and more like it was a test, based on what you said."

"A test?"

"One devised by Lady Midday to see how our bonds, and the Heartstone's power, are doing."

"Well...no one died, right?" I mused. "So hopefully that means I passed?"

"With flying colors, I'd say," Emory said with a small smile.

"Next time I'm going to request the written exam," Caden muttered. "Surely that awful woman realizes we don't have time for her nonsense?"

"She revels in nonsense," Rhett pointed out.

I kept quiet, because I wasn't sure how to put into words what I was feeling.

We might not have had time for this test, but I'd taken it, and I'd learned something in the process: I was terrified of losing them.

Any of them.

Four kings.

It was crazy and intimidating and like nothing I could have ever imagined for my life. But standing in the middle of the four of them, I suddenly realized that I felt more whole than I ever had before. All of my pieces were here, and I didn't want to think about a single one of them going missing.

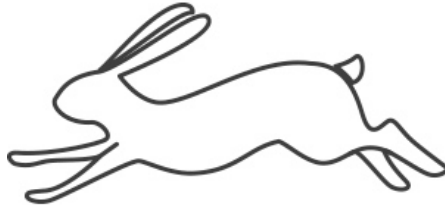
A strange mixture of fear and desire trilled through me, and I squeezed Emory's hand without really thinking about it. He squeezed back, and planted a chaste kiss against my hair in response.

"Come on," he whispered. "Let's get out of this place."

We filed out as one unit, a single heart drawn together by the magic simmering inside me.

And now I only had to find a way to keep us together.

CHAPTER 19



In Which the Rules of the Game Change

It was amazing how things had shifted in just a few short days.

It *felt* like we had been traveling for weeks after everything that had happened, but really it had only taken five days for me to warm up to the idea of being Adrian's riding partner.

Horseback riding, that is.

Get your mind out of the gutter.

The thought of any other kind of...um, physical excursion with him—with *all* of them—remained intimidating. Especially on top of the realization that I was developing actual feelings for all of them, and the fear that came with that: what if we didn't all make it back from this journey?

That last concern was fully taking shape largely because in the distance I could finally see it: the actual, tangible darkness that was overtaking Wonderland.

The Sweeping Night.

Black mist billowed, and even from miles away I could see how the landscape changed under that mist—into dead, foreboding shades of grey.

We were riding straight toward it.

We were finally out of the Tovey Woods at least, and making our way across an area that Rhett had called the White Plains. Almost at the edge of the Kingdom of the Sun, and within a day's riding distance of the ruins of Alice's castle, which was on the border where the Sun and Frost Kingdoms met.

Once we approached that border and made our way into that black mist, there was no telling what sort of monsters we might face.

But the day's ride had been relatively uneventful so far, and so Adrian had been taking advantage of that calmness and making good on his promise to properly teach me how to ride a horse.

He was sitting behind me now. He'd guided my feet into the stirrups, and his hands rested lightly on my hips, pressuring them to rise and fall with the gigantic horse's trot.

"It will become second nature to you after awhile." His voice was purely instructional, but he'd leaned in when he spoke—close enough that I felt warm breath on the back of my neck. Close enough, too, that as our bodies rose and fell they occasionally brushed against each other.

I was having an embarrassing time focusing on following the horse's rhythm, because I kept slipping and getting distracted by trying to match Adrian's rhythm instead. It was helpful at first. He was stoic and unyielding as usual, completely focused on the lesson—so he was a perfect example to follow.

But after a mile or so, my skin was flushed, itching from a desire that I was getting tired of blocking out. Every time he touched me, my body reacted a little more strongly, twisting and curving toward that touch, or subtly pressing a little further back into his firm stomach, a little deeper into his lap.

Adrian's breathing grew heavier. His fingers tightened their grip on me. He readjusted his position once, twice, three times. We fell completely out of rhythm with the horse's trot, and the creature beneath us shuddered, tossed its head and started to stray from our intended path.

The Heartstone was awake suddenly, a soft, humming power radiating through me, threatening to break free.

Adrian cleared his throat and, sounding a bit more flustered than usual, he brought his horse to a halt with a vocal command. Once we'd stopped he dismounted and said, "Maybe we should take a break. Refill the canteens and consider our strategy for storming the castle and such; we need to finish preparing the spells that will protect us from the Sweeping Night before we get any closer, anyway."

"Is it safe to stop for so long?" I wondered aloud, eyeing that dark mist in the distance.

I wasn't in a hurry to charge into it, but I also didn't want to give it any more time to spread.

"Perhaps not," Adrian said. "But I'm feeling dangerously close to completely and forcefully breaking that *no touching you* rule that we've set." His tone switched abruptly from gruff desire to its usual commanding cadence as he added, "So we are going to stop for awhile. Perhaps camp right here tonight."

I couldn't even bring myself to be annoyed by that demanding voice. The authority in it actually sent another shiver of desire racing through me.

Damn.

Was I really *that* far gone?

The others caught up to us before I could decide on the answer to that question.

The light around my chest was faint, but it was still the first thing they noticed

"We wondered how long you two would last," Rhett said.

I blushed while Adrian said nothing, his attention on messing with the horse's bridle. He adjusted a few straps before moving back and placing a hand casually on my leg, holding both me and the horse steady and still.

"We were discussing it," Emory added as the three of them dismounted and secured their horses, "because the closer we get to the darkness, the more danger we're going to be in if the Heartstone gives off our position."

"I realize that," Adrian said, closing his eyes against the thought.

"And it seems we aren't going to be able to fight our strengthening attractions to you, Alex," Rhett added. "So we might need to try another tactic."

"Another tactic?" I repeated.

"I suggested we just let you stay with him," Caden said with a grin and a nod at Adrian. "Probably not going to get more than a faint light out of touching him, eh?"

The Sun King's hand tightened around my leg.

He didn't rise to the bait, though, so I did it for him.

"Actually, I'd probably be safer with you, Caden," I said. "Shame you don't have a bigger horse, so that we could enjoy a completely platonic ride together."

Adrian glanced away, hiding his amusement.

Rhett and Emory smiled as well, but Caden was unfazed. “Is that a challenge, Rabbit-Heart?” he asked, coolly. “Because I promise you that if you give me a chance to work my actual magic, that horseback ride would last approximately one minute before you started begging me to do a different sort of riding.”

I felt heat creeping up the back of my neck, but Rhett just laughed. “Actual magic? Brace yourself, Alex; I think he’s about to start doing card tricks or something.”

“Maybe he could try a disappearing act?” Emory suggested cheerfully.

“If you two spent less time ragging on me and more time taking notes,” Caden said, “then maybe you could learn a thing or two about how to work some of that magic I’m talking about.”

Rhett snorted. “I think I’ll be fine without your teaching, thanks. Now—back to the matter at hand.”

“The ‘other tactics?’” I prompted.

“Yes. My thinking is that it might make more sense to let you practice controlling the Heartstone’s magic and not letting it overwhelm you. You’ve proven strong enough, I think. You said that you managed to control the stone’s power and guide it into that locked door when you rescued us before, correct?”

“Yes, but...”

He continued before my doubts could fully surface: “So it stands to reason that you can control that power into staying dormant unless you want to use it, doesn’t it?”

“I guess?”

“So, we’ll practice. We will try to tempt you—and said power—and you will try to control any of that power that rises up.”

“This sounds like an incredibly fun game, doesn’t it?” Caden added. “Much more fun than the no-touching one.”

“Assuming you’re willing, of course,” Rhett said, ignoring Caden and keeping his eyes level with mine.

That craving that Adrian’s closeness had stirred in me had yet to fully settle.

I was probably a little *too* willing to play this game, to be honest.
And also a little afraid that it was going to end in disaster.

Adrian seemed to notice my uncertainty. "It sounds like it would be exhausting for Alex," he said, helping me down from our horse's back. His hand stayed on my arm even after I had found my balance against the rocky ground.

"I'll be fine," I insisted, just because it was second-nature to disagree with him at this point. "I mean... probably."

"We'll go at her pace," Rhett assured us both. "I'll go first, and I'll go slowly."

"Why are you first?" Caden asked.

"Because you have the impulse control of a sixteen year old?"

"Better the sex drive of a sixteen year old than that of a seventy year old man, which I sometimes wonder if you have."

"Firstly: there's nothing wrong with a slow and thorough lovemaking experience."

"*Lovemaking experience*," Caden laughed. "That is exactly what a seventy year old man would call it."

"—secondly, the more methodically we go about this, the easier it will be for Alex to handle."

"What are you going to do, make a bar graph to chart her arousal or something?"

"I might." He gave Caden a cursory glance. "Or you could do it, and make yourself useful for once." Looking back at me, he added, "You'll be fine. You can do this."

I nodded slowly, quietly reassured in that way he always seemed to make me.

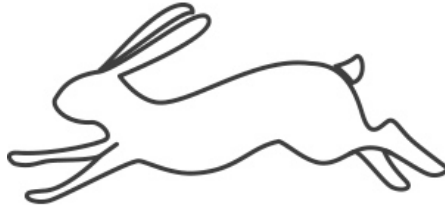
Adrian finally relented as well, letting go of my arm and turning to Emory instead. The two of them decided to focus on that 'storming the castle' plan, and Adrian insisted that he wanted to question Emory regarding details of that kingdom we were approaching.

It crossed my mind that maybe he just didn't want to stand here and watch; he still looked more flustered than I was used to seeing him, and I imagined watching or playing this little game with us wouldn't help.

"Be gentle with her," I heard him command the others before he stepped aside.

Rhett again promised he would, while Caden grinned a wicked little grin that made my breath catch in my throat as I wondered, for probably the millionth time in the last week, just what I had gotten myself into.

CHAPTER 20



In Which Things Get a Little Dangerous

“Tell me when to stop,” Rhett whispered.

I swallowed hard, determined to keep control as he trailed his fingers along my jawline before threading them through my hair. He gently but firmly gripped the back of my head, holding me still as he leaned his lips closer to mine. They parted hungrily but didn’t quite touch.

He was ever the patient one, and I knew he was waiting for me to be ready.

Desire pulsed through me. I struggled to concentrate through it, to keep that magic inside of me from flaring dangerously in response.

You can do this.

The memory of his words reinforced my resolve. In my mind, I commanded my magic to settle—and it did. I almost couldn’t believe it; I lifted a hand to my chest, feeling for that familiar warmth. But it wasn’t there.

Neither was that dangerous light.

“You’re doing well so far.” Rhett’s deep voice sent a fresh wave of want cascading through me.

Feeling a bit more confident, I stood on my tiptoes and closed the space between our lips.

He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t immediately kiss me back. His fingers tightened against the back of my head. He closed his eyes, and his body trembled with just barely-there restraint for a moment before he slowly pulled away.

“You need to let me be in control,” he said. “If you do that again, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to remain level-headed enough to conduct this little training we’re doing.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I’d been joking, but addressing him as such made him suck in a sharp breath. He still contained himself long enough to let me bury my magic once more, and he waited until I was steady and looking him directly in the eyes before he spoke again, in that same throaty voice: “What are you imagining now, Gorgeous?”

I started to avert my gaze, embarrassed by the thoughts racing through my head, but he caught my chin and held me still.

“Tell me,” he commanded.

I squirmed. My chest felt hot and heavy.

He smiled a devastatingly handsome little smile, but was patient again as I regained control. Then he said, “I won’t make you say it if you don’t want to. I could probably guess though, couldn’t I?”

His fingers crept from underneath my hair and slid down to the hollow of my throat. He absently traced patterns across my skin while his beautiful blue eyes drank me in with a studying, appreciative gaze.

My breathing sped up a bit, but this time I was able to keep the magic from stirring.

So, improvement.

Maybe I *could* do this.

“I would guess,” he began after a pause, “that you’re fantasizing about calling me *Sir*, and obeying whatever I told you to do. I seem to remember you referring to me as *Professor* when you first arrived here.”

Shit.

Down, Magic.

Rhett’s hand stayed against my skin, while the other one slipped against the small of my back. My heaving breaths lifted my breasts and tempted his touch to slide a little lower. As it did, I thought surely I was going to lose control.

But I didn’t.

I was trembling, enjoying the feel of his hands against me, but that rose-colored light stayed buried inside.

“Stay relaxed,” he purred. “Control your magic, and then we can have whatever sort of fun fantasy you want.”

I was too breathless to properly reply.

He smiled again, but I was more prepared this time; it was becoming reflexive, guarding my magic against the desire that threatened to send it spiraling out of control. And even though I could practically feel his need throbbing in the little bit of space between us, he remained patient—*methodical*, as he'd put it earlier.

He watched the space above my heart, waiting to be sure that light didn't appear, for almost a full minute before the hand he'd placed against my lower back began to ease me closer and closer and our hips pressed together.

"We could start with that fantasy if you want," he said. "There are plenty of things I could *teach* you, probably."

I had absolutely no doubt about that.

For the record, I wasn't a virgin. But I'd only been with a grand total of one guy, and I was currently trying my hardest not to think about said guy and anything we'd done. I wanted to forget all the ways he'd hurt me and twisted up my thoughts and feelings about love and everything that went with it.

Everything I'd learned with that monster, I wanted it *gone*.

The thought of letting Rhett teach me new things was tempting—and yet it also sent my anxiety spiraling through me.

"You're supposed to be going easy on me, remember?" I whispered.

A corner of his mouth quirked. "Just keep still this time," he instructed, "and I'll be very gentle. Promise."

I gazed up into his blue eyes, and I braced myself. Then nodded. Just once. Slowly.

It was all the encouragement he needed to pull me more fully against him. He trailed kisses along my throat, up along my jaw, and paused at my ear long enough to lightly nibble it before moving to my lips and gently parting them with his own.

Chills raced over me. Warmth rose and fell in my chest, while in my head I repeated what was becoming my mantra: *Magic—behave. And anxiety—leave me the hell alone.*

I could do this.

I was here with a king, not in the past with a monster. And that magic inside me was the key to my future, and I *would* control it.

"You still okay?"

I nodded, even though I felt a bit dizzy.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured, his mouth still close to mine and his eyes still alight with hunger. “So, how about we move on to your next test?”

Suddenly I felt another hand against my back, fingers inching just far enough under my tunic to touch skin.

Lips were against my ear a second later, and then a new voice: “Hello, Rabbit.”

I tensed, and I could practically hear the smirk in Caden’s voice as he said, “You seem surprised.”

“I thought you’d disappeared on us,” I said after managing to catch my breath.

He laughed— a low, dark sound that vibrated across the back of my neck. “Oh no, not after your smart little comment earlier. You can’t challenge me like that and then expect me not to follow up and prove you wrong.”

One of Rhett’s hands had moved to my hip, and now the other one pushed through my hair, his fingers cradling my head and keeping my lips close to his as he said, “Remember, you can still tell us to stop.”

Did I want them to stop?

This felt dangerous.

Like I was a tinderbox doused in gasoline and squeezed between two open flames. And that magic I was supposed to be controlling felt even heavier in my chest, suddenly.

The Heartstone had become a time bomb that was ticking faster and faster.

But I couldn’t bring myself to defuse it just yet.

Caden’s lips moved against the side of my neck. Warm lips, smooth teeth teasing, parting to let his tongue slip through and press into my skin hard enough that it was probably going to leave a bruise.

I gasped.

He responded by slipping a hand into that thin bit of space between me and Rhett, his fingers splaying across my stomach, reaching lower and lower, pulling me closer to him and staking his own claim over my body.

But it didn’t feel like they were fighting over me, somehow; they worked together, the two of them moving so that there was never emptiness between us for long.

No more emptiness.

It felt too good to be true.

So it probably is, hissed a nasty voice in the back of my mind.

“Stop.” I barely managed to choke out the word in between fighting for the breaths their touches were taking away.

But they stopped.

Rhett first, and then Caden—the latter a bit more reluctantly, his hand trailing around my side and lingering against my back for a moment before he stepped aside.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I...I felt like maybe I was about to lose control of the Heartstone...”

That was mostly a lie, and I was a terrible liar, and the way Caden was looking at me made me almost sure he was aware that I wasn’t telling the whole truth.

He didn’t call me out on it, though.

“You don’t have to apologize for telling us to stop,” Rhett said. “Ever.”

“Make no mistake,” Caden added, “we want you to give yourself to us. But the operative word there is *give*. It’s more fun that way. Besides, we were trying to help you here, not overwhelm you.”

I nodded but said nothing.

The problem was that the last time I’d given in to a man—one who claimed he was trying to help me, same as these two were—I ended up hurting for it.

I wanted to believe that wouldn’t happen with these four, but...

Well, Caden had even called this a game, hadn’t he?

Somehow I kept forgetting that I was in a strange new world, and they were powerful. Dangerous. *Kings*.

And it was entirely possible they were just playing with me.

My body was more than ready to keep trying to believe in them, but my mind was telling me to step away and clear my head, to not sink any deeper into this rabbit hole until I was sure that I could win this game—and that it wouldn’t end up the way it had in my nightmare: with the four of them standing over me while I was left with a bleeding, gaping hole in my chest.

“I think I need to go for a walk,” I said, decisively.

“Are you okay?” Rhett asked, starting after me.

They weren't the same person.

Logically, I knew that.

But it didn't stop me from wincing as if it was Bryce reaching for me, trying to keep me from leaving him again. Trying to control me.

"I need to go for a walk *alone*," I amended, voice trembling a bit.

Rhett hesitated, obviously torn between not wanting to upset me but also not wanting me to go off on my own.

"You're thinking of him again, aren't you?" Caden blurted out. "Your asshole ex. That *Shade*. You get the same scared look in your eyes every time he crosses your mind, you know."

I turned away.

I felt like I'd officially been found out. Like all of my madness was on display for them both to see, and it felt crazier than anything else this weird world had to offer.

"I'm sorry—"

"Stop apologizing," he interrupted, a violent edge in his voice. "You didn't do anything wrong."

My face burned. I turned and saw Adrian making his way toward us, and my desire to run increased ten-fold; I knew that as soon as he reached us he was going to start demanding to know why I looked upset. Commanding me to talk about things I didn't want to even *think* about.

Demanding and commanding.

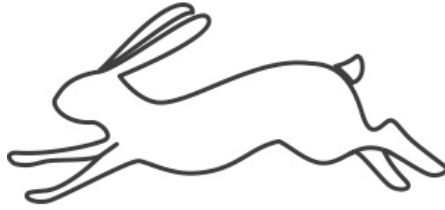
His favorite pastimes.

But luckily, I could see Emory in the distance, too, standing on top of a nearby hill. Like a softly glowing lighthouse guiding me toward him. I wanted to be alone, but I knew the others wouldn't go for that—so I decided the quiet and gentlest of the four kings was my next best option.

"I'm going to go talk to Emory," I said, as if that had been my plan all along.

I practically sprinted away, circling wide around Adrian and pretending I didn't hear him call my name.

CHAPTER 21



In Which the Night Sweeps a Little Too Close for Comfort

As I reached the crest of the hill Emory sat on, I saw it again—or I thought I did, at least.

That shadowy figure that had been stalking me since I entered Wonderland.

I blinked and, as usual, it was gone again.

It was such a common occurrence now that I didn't react strongly enough for Emory to notice it; he simply greeted me with a small smile as I came closer, but he said nothing for a long time—which is exactly what I'd been hoping for. We stood in silence, staring out toward the looming castle in the distance, wearing identical looks of contemplation.

I wondered what he was thinking about.

"So," he finally said, "how did the training session go?"

I heaved a sigh.

"That good, huh?"

"Not disastrous, I guess. But..."

"But?"

"But I'm overwhelmed and confused and feeling exceptionally un-queenlike."

He offered me his hand.

I took it and let him lead me a little ways down the hill, to a flat rock-face that was wide enough for us both to sit down on. I could still hear the voices of the other three kings—it sounded like they were arguing. Adrian

probably wasn't happy about the way I'd stormed off, and he was no doubt questioning the others about *why*.

I felt a little guilty for leaving Caden and Rhett to deal with his wrath.

Not guilty enough to go back and face it my self, but still—the regret was there, which made me sort of a decent person, right?

With our backs to them and the hill blocking us from their sight, it felt like Emory and I were all alone on the hillside, and that made the world below us—and the distance left to Alice's Castle— seem even larger and more intimidating.

“Can you see your kingdom from here?” I asked.

He pointed toward a thin strip of whitish blue snaking across the ground far in the distance. “The Cress River forms most of the western border,” he said. “So everything far ahead and to the left of that bit of blue. That's my home.”

He was frowning, I realized. It wasn't an expression I was used to seeing on him, and it made me even more curious about what he'd been contemplating earlier.

“I imagine it can't be easy going back,” I said after a minute of thought. “To get so close to your kingdom again. I'm guessing you had to leave it in a hurry?”

“Much more quickly than I wanted to.” Pained hesitation, and then, “I left behind two younger brothers. I have no idea what's happened to them.”

I couldn't speak.

I didn't know what to say as I suddenly remembered that night we'd danced in the library of the Sun Palace—and how reluctant he'd been to talk about his past.

But it seemed impossible *not* to talk about it now we were staring it in the face.

He apparently agreed, because he softly continued: “We were separated during the siege of my palace. I searched everywhere, for as long as I could, until my guards and advisors dragged me away and insisted that I had to leave and get to safety. I've assigned others to keep searching in my stead, of course. But so far...no word.”

“We can search for them on the way to Alice's Castle,” I said, without hesitation. “Surely we can spare some time to venture a little deeper into

the Frost Kingdom and at least take a look around? Maybe they're hiding, just waiting for you to come back. Maybe we—"

"You can see that black cloud, can't you? How thickly it sits over so much of that land I just pointed out to you? That is the Sweeping Night we've mentioned, but has anybody told you what we believe causes it?"

"...No."

"It's a byproduct. Every time any sort of creature is killed by that particular brand of dark magic that the Nightmarcher and his followers use, this is what they give off as their bodies decay. That mist is dangerous to those of us still living, which is why we'll have to wear more protective clothing and spells to venture close to it. And just hope and pray that those things will be enough."

"It's all dangerous, isn't it? So what does it matter if we detour into *more* danger?"

"Alex."

"They're your *family*."

"Half-brothers, really," he said, patiently. "We have different fathers; I am the last true descendant of the King of Diamonds. So I can't do anything too reckless until my duty is fulfilled—as Adrian was just reminding me. For perhaps the dozenth time."

"He just likes to boss people around."

A brief, bemused little smile lit up his face. "He's right, though. We're all the last of our bloodlines. His brush with death in the Tovey Woods was a bit of a nasty wake-up call, and got us all thinking: If one of us dies, we might not be able to restore your crown—or your magic—properly. And in case you've forgotten, that magic is our last hope."

"Of course I haven't forgotten."

"Given the choice between saving my family or saving my entire kingdom, what would you expect me to choose?"

Our gazes met, and the pain in his brilliant green eyes unraveled something in me, making my voice crack a bit as I said, "I wouldn't blame you for either choice."

He looked shocked.

I quickly tried to explain myself: "You're more noble than I am, I guess. I get it—the greatest good for the greatest number of people and all that. But I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't have thought about taking care of my own flesh and blood first. I don't have siblings, but if I had a chance to

save, say, my parents...I don't know. I guess I still need to work on seeing the big picture."

"I never said that saving them wasn't my first thought as well," he admitted. "But never mind it; I didn't mean to worry you about these things. You obviously have enough to worry about."

"It's okay," I replied, and it was true—because I'd always been better at dealing with other people's pain than I was at dealing with my own. This was actually a nice distraction from the meltdown I'd been on the verge of with Rhett and Caden.

"Thank you, though," Emory said after a moment.

"I haven't really done anything."

"You settled my mind about some things."

"Well, after I have that crown, I'll do more. Finding your brothers will be the first thing we do."

His gaze locked on mine again, and that familiar soft, adoring look that always made me blush was shining in his eyes. "You may not feel like it," he said quietly, "but I assure you, you are perfectly queenlike."

He looked away quickly after that, trying but failing to hide the newest frown that was making its way across his face. After a minute or two he took my hand without saying a word.

And I found that all I wanted to do—despite my doubts and fears about Wonderland's kings and my intertwined destiny with them—was to wrap my fingers through the spaces between Emory's and hold on tight.

That anxiety from earlier had settled. I was too busy being anxious for him, and focusing once more on how I was actually going to pull off that whole saving Wonderland thing.

I felt my magic stirring in response. I glanced down to make sure that pressure on my chest was nothing more than that. It wasn't; there was no visible light.

I breathed in deep, relieved.

Emory noticed the movement and said, "You never really told me how it went earlier, aside from *not disastrous*; but the Heartstone seems quieter than usual. Or maybe," he added with a laugh, "you've simply stopped feeling anything for me that might trigger it?"

"It's not that. Promise."

"Good."

“I’m just starting to get the hang of controlling it, I think. I can feel it coming, and I can direct it a little better. Who knows? I might actually be able to handle this magic and not get us all killed in the end.”

“I don’t doubt that, love.”

“Well, you always seemed to have a ridiculous amount of faith in me for some reason.”

He smiled that boy-next-door smile of his, lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to it. “Guilty as charged,” he said.

“The practice really *did* help. But I still have a long ways to go, really.”

His gaze was shining with desire, suddenly; I didn’t have to guess at what he was thinking about this time—I had a feeling he was imagining me and the others ‘practicing’.

I was thinking about it now, too, and my pulse raced in response. I leaned toward Emory without really thinking about it, and he fully embraced the motion, turning so that we were better aligned with each other and reaching up to cup my face with his hand.

“Show me what you learned, how about?” he suggested, tilting my mouth toward his.

The kiss was slow, almost lazy in that delicious way that summertime afternoons were. I wanted to melt into the pure sweetness of it. I didn’t want it to end.

His arms wrapped around me and pulled me deeper into it, and when we finally did pull our lips apart—only so that we could breathe—he didn’t let me go.

I didn’t try to go. I stayed curled against him, content and comfortable. A cold wind had started to blow, racing up the hillside as if determined not to let me forget about the horrors that awaited us in the distance—which made me even more grateful than I usually was for Emory’s warmth.

“I would suggest we practice some more, but it’s getting late,” he commented in a whisper.

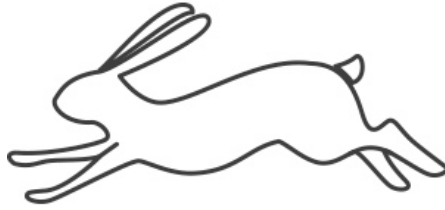
“I think I’m going to sleep right here,” I replied sleepily.

He held me tighter, shielding me further from that wind, and I buried my face into his chest and tried not to think about what we had to face tomorrow.

But I knew the dark clouds still beckoned, even if I couldn’t see them.

And morning was going to come too soon.

CHAPTER 22



In Which There Are Reunions of a Sort

Another day of riding passed in a blur.

The awkwardness and anxieties of the previous day's practice sessions had more or less dissolved, and we were back to what had become our normal: Adrian was quietly soldiering on, Rhett and Caden were bantering back and forth, Emory was trying his best to keep that bantering from turning into bickering, and I was watching the world passing by me with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

We traveled at a quick pace, but we occasionally stopped long enough to water the horses, to refresh the spells that were protecting us from the Sweeping Night, and to do some more 'practicing'. With every pulse of the Heartstone that I managed to suppress and control during those practices, I felt myself more fully embracing the impossible destiny I was traveling toward.

The person I'd been on Earth was disappearing, bit by bit.

What other choice did I have but to let her go?

What else could I do, when suddenly we were so close to Alice's castle that, if I squinted, I could see the outlines of turrets growing larger, closer, through that shadowy haze that surrounded us?

This was it.

Ready or not, this was *it*.

That haze—the byproduct of the slain, as Emory had told me—was growing thicker; it was like we were making our way directly through a dark storm cloud. I shook constantly from the cold and the wind that

accompanied it. Even with the spells and extra clothing we'd used for protection, it still felt like there were hundreds of little insects itching over my skin, trying to bite and inject poison into me.

I kept expecting bigger, weirder, more terrifying monsters to barrel their way out of the darkness and gobble us all the way up.

But we made it all the way to our planned camp unscathed.

Mainly because a perimeter had been prepared for us, I was told—which apparently meant that others were being attacked on our behalf. Soldiers from all four kingdoms surrounded us in a wide berth, clearing our path and holding the Nightmarcher's minions at bay. We had business at Alice's castle, they'd been told, and they needed to do everything they could to ensure that we were able to carry it out.

I never really saw our warriors. Couldn't hear them, either, aside from the occasional low thud or echoing, tinny sound in the fog—sounds that *might* have been weapons and armor being tested by those minions they fought. It was unsettling to think that there might be people dying to protect us, and I couldn't even witness it. Or thank them for it. Or try to save them from it...

It made me feel gross and helpless.

As I dismounted, I tried explaining this feeling to my riding partner—and, rather unsurprisingly, Adrian was stoic and stone cold in his response.

"You are their soon-to-be queen," he reminded me. "It's their job to protect you, no matter the cost."

"So no pressure, right?" I muttered. "Just some people dying in hopes that I can save their world in return. No pressure *at all*."

"You should sleep while you can," he replied, as if that would solve the matter. I was beginning to think he thought that solved *all* matters.

"Thanks," I hissed. "You're being a great comfort, as always."

He breathed in deeply through his nose. Exhaled just as forcefully, and took obvious pains to keep his tone even as he said, "We started out with a goal in mind, and we are too close to lose focus now. We have our own battles to fight; let our soldiers fight theirs."

I scowled at him, but he was apparently so used to me doing it that it didn't faze him. He just kept unloading the supplies from our horse, laying out blankets, finding the flint and steel and starting to build a fire with

motions that had become methodical after seven nights of doing essentially the same thing.

“It’s all part of the same battle, isn’t it?” I insisted.

“Must you argue against everything I say?” he inquired, more to the wind than me.

“Yes. I absolutely must.”

He sighed, but I think I saw the beginnings of one of his reluctant smiles as he went back to striking the flint. Seconds later, it finally transferred an igniting spark to the kindling he’d gathered.

The others caught up with us a minute later, and for once Adrian looked happy, or at least relieved, to see the other kings. And—to his approval, I’m sure,—none of the other three were particularly supportive of my argument.

I seethed in silence, trying not to think about those dying soldiers, while the four kings sat close together, their eyes downcast and their voices low as they discussed our plans one final time.

I listened to the plans without engaging.

We’d been making these plans for a week now; I probably could have accurately mapped out Alice’s castle just from the picture their words had painted in my mind.

And that’s what I did until I managed to fall into an uneasy sleep: I imagined myself walking the castle’s crumbling halls, twisting and turning until I finally reached the throne room and the crown that was waiting for me there.

No nightmares tonight, by some miracle. But the reality surrounding us was bad enough, and since I kept flailing and startling myself awake, I got to glimpse that reality more than I cared to.

Our soldiers weren’t protecting us from every part of that nightmare around us, either; because early the next morning, I woke (yet again) and I saw it once more: that person in the shadows, watching me.

They were more clear than ever this time.

Against the grey haze, they were a perfect silhouette of a clearly human body. A woman in a dress, it looked like.

She turned and ran as I sat up—but she didn’t fully disappear this time.

I started to call after her, but as I looked around the quiet camp, something held my tongue.

I was the only one awake, I realized. There was no one to hold me back, to try and tell me that I should *just get some sleep*, or that I was imagining this figure who had quietly been haunting my steps ever since I came into this world.

Curiosity often leads to trouble, I reminded myself.

But just as that hadn't stopped my great-grandmother, it didn't stop me either. There was something pulling at me, a feeling I couldn't really explain that made me believe I had to follow that running woman.

I felt like I should have followed her a long time ago, really—like we had plans to meet, and I was going to be late if I didn't hurry.

I wrapped my cloak tightly around myself, 'borrowed' a knife from the belt lying beside a snoring Caden, and then I crept off on silent feet into the fog.

I wasn't going to go far, I promised myself. Just close enough to get a better look. As I snuck along, I made sure to keep looking back, to not lose sight of the camp. To carve marks in the dirt, too, in case the fog shifted and I needed help finding my way back.

Then the mist in front of me suddenly cleared.

I forgot all about finding my way back.

Because rising in front of me, at the end of a path of fragmented red brick, was my great-grandmother's castle.

It was clearly a shell of its former self, as I'd been told it would be. Towers were chipped off, caving in, or missing all together. Moss covered the white stone in thick patches. The few windows that hadn't been reduced to jagged outlines of broken glass were so filthy that I couldn't even tell what color they were supposed to be. Tangles of vines and bushes, running wild with equal parts bright flowers and dead brown leaves, had claimed most of the yard and choked the majority of the walls that encircled that yard.

Despite its forlorn state, the castle still seemed out of place in the rolling darkness around it. There was a grandness, a magic to it that even years of neglect hadn't completely managed to do away with.

What appeared to be the main entrance consisted of a black door flanked by two sleek statues of rabbits, both frozen in mid-leap. Symbols ran along the bottom and top of the door—a diamond, a heart, a club, a spade. They were tiny compared to the symbol that graced the center: that

of a white rabbit stretched on its hind legs, reaching toward a crown with heart-shaped jewels, and centered between two curved swords.

Staring at it, I felt warm for the first time since we'd started making our way through the Sweeping Night.

The reason for that warmth became obvious a moment later, when rose-colored light surrounded me.

I was shocked by it at first—I'd been doing a better job of controlling the Heartstone, after all, and now I could at least usually tell when its power was coming.

It was different this time.

Not out of control, but I also didn't feel like I could have changed the course it had set for itself, even if I wanted to; it swept away from me, moved like a wave breaking against the door.

That door creaked open.

The light slipped through the opening and disappeared, while I remained frozen in my place on the broken path.

"Are you going to go inside?"

I looked down at the sound of the familiar, droll voice. Lewis glanced up at me with his usual smug expression, but when I frowned, hesitant and clearly uncertain, he actually showed something like affection toward me, weaving in and out of my legs and purring loudly.

It was almost as weird as the way the Heartstone's light had acted.

Something about this castle was apparently altering personalities entirely, because I felt a sudden surge of bravery myself.

Or was it stupidity?

Both, probably.

I took a few steps before I'd really thought about it—through the door, into a wide open atrium with marble floors, and then all the way to bottom of an elaborate staircase. It rose at least twenty steps before splitting into two more sets of stairs that circled higher than I could see.

The front door slammed shut behind me.

My hand clenched around the handle of my knife as I turned toward the noise.

No, it's Caden's knife, not mine.

What was I thinking leaving him and the others?

I felt a rush of cool wind. It came and went in seconds, like an invisible creature had just raced past me. A moment later, I had that

inexplicable feeling of being watched, and I was almost sure of it—someone was standing on the stairs.

I was afraid, but I slowly turned around anyway.

A woman was standing on the platform at the top of the first set of those stairs. Her body was backlit by light streaming in from a nearby window, making her golden hair appear to glow. The same light obscured her facial features somewhat, but I didn't need to see them.

I had a feeling they probably looked very similar to mine.

Lewis scampered up the steps, pausing a few from the top and stretching, kneading his claws in and out of the faded, plum-colored runner.

"Queen Alice," he said, flashing his toothy grin at her. "How're you getting on?"

"Cheshire Cat," she greeted him, "hello old friend."

"I've a name now, you know," he said. "Courtesy of your great granddaughter, as it were."

"Speaking of her—I hope you haven't been causing her trouble."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

She gave him a stern look before turning back toward me, and then she began her graceful descent down the stairs, gesturing at the dusty wreckage around her as she came. "I'd offer you tea or something of the sort, but I'm afraid this old place isn't what it used to be as far as entertaining space goes."

"I don't care much for tea, anyway," I said, still breathless as I took in her appearance.

"Oh my—be sure you don't tell anyone that. It's practically a crime not to drink tea in Wonderland, you know."

I couldn't bring myself to keep speaking; I couldn't do anything except stare, really.

She wore a dark blue dress made out of a heavy material that shimmered and moved precisely like I would have expected it to—not like it was hanging over the body of a ghost, in other words. She looked perfectly solid. Perfectly healthy, too, her complexion fair and her cheeks rosy, her grey-blue eyes wide and curious like the Alice I remembered from my childhood storybooks. Those eyes made her appear youthful in spite of the tiny wrinkles along her forehead and the strands of silver hair that were more obvious now that she had stepped away from the window.

Her movements were smooth, and the heels of her shoes clicked loudly against the marble as she made her way over to me.

“How is this possible?” I managed to gasp. “How are you...”

“Alive?”

“Well, yes.”

“The simple answer is: I’m not. My soul lives on in this dusty old place, thanks to the magic that was intertwined with it when I was alive. Magic that is, in turn, tied to certain items within this palace.”

“Heartstone magic?”

“Precisely. Most of it, I passed on to your mother, but enough lingered that it kept a small piece of me here. And now you’ve brought the core of that Heartstone back, and my soul has pulled itself back together accordingly.”

“So my magic woke you up?”

“You could say that, at least temporarily, it has. We likely don’t have long.”

She was the first family I’d seen in almost a decade. I had a million questions for her, and it didn’t seem fair that I might not even have time to ask one tenth of them.

Then again, I’m not sure why I was still expecting life to be *fair* at this point.

“So has it been you this whole time?” I asked, blurting out the first of those questions that came to mind. “The person I’ve been seeing in the shadows since I arrived in Wonderland?”

“I’m afraid not.” She folded her arms and canted her head. “That sounds more like the sort of trick my old enemy would play.”

“Your old enemy?”

“He’s calling himself the *Nightmarcher* now,” Lewis informed her, slinking down the stairs, disappearing at the bottom of them only to reappear between the two of us.

“He always did have a flair for dramatics,” Alice muttered.

“Who is he, exactly?” I asked.

Obvious pain flashed in her eyes, and her voice was missing some of that royal certainty I was beginning to expect from her when she said, “Someone like myself, I thought. Another unsuspecting traveler who tumbled down the rabbit hole and into this strange world. I rescued him

after he fell. Took care of him—and for some reason, I let him convince me that *I* needed rescuing, too.

“He did everything he could to tear me away from Wonderland’s kings, and to make me believe I needed to go back to Earth. To leave my crown and my power—and my kings—behind. But the truth is that once the kings and I were divided, I was, of course, much weaker. And that was when this man you know as *the Nightmarcher* murdered me.”

Her voice was chillingly calm.

I guess she’d had a lot of time to come to terms with her assassination, but personally I felt like I was about to throw up on her behalf.

“I was tricked,” she concluded. “I realize that now, of course; he’d only wanted my magic all along.”

“But he didn’t get it, right?”

A small smile crossed her pale lips. “No. The universe had other plans. I’d given birth to your mother a year before all of this madness began, you know. We told everyone she died shortly after the birth, when really I’d secretly sent her to Earth—to live with my own mother—in an attempt to protect her from the horrors of this world. And when I died, my magic sought her out. It found her, took refuge in her, and it was decades before anybody realized it was there.”

Her smile faded as her gaze took mine and seemed to get lost in it for a moment.

I wondered if she was trying to see my mother in me.

“The story has obviously become more complicated since then,” she said, “and there’s more to be said. But that’s how it began.”

“I knew my mother was raised by her grandmother, but I didn’t know why,” I thought aloud.

Or maybe I *had* known, but it was just one more piece of my true identity that had been stolen from me by that Shade I’d spent the past nine years living with.

“I wish things could have been different,” Alice said softly. “I wish I could have told you these things my—”

Dark laughter interrupted her.

A moment later it was followed by a silky male voice: “You tell the story with so little *passion*. So black and white. And you know as well as I do that nothing in Wonderland is ever so straightforward.”

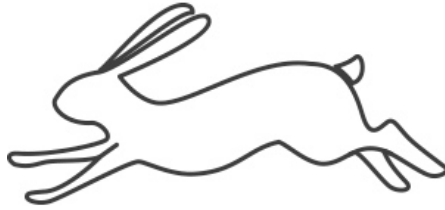
Lewis promptly disappeared as Alice and I turned toward the voice.

The door was still closed; I had never heard it open.

So I didn't know where he had come from, but somehow he was suddenly *there*, standing behind us, and he looked exactly like he had in all my nightmares: pale skin, feral golden eyes, towering body clothed all in black. That front door didn't seem nearly as massive when he stood against it. The entire room felt smaller for having him in it.

The Nightmarcher withdrew a sword and stepped forward, and the ground began to shake

CHAPTER 23



In Which I Start to Think I Might Be Able to Breathe Fire

“Guard your heart, Alex dear,” Alice said, stepping in front of me. “But know that he has no real power in this place. He can’t touch you.”

The ground continued to tremble.

“No,” the Nightmarcher agreed with a slight, chilling smile. “I can’t—but I can still cause *accidents*.”

He lifted that sword in his hand and, on cue, a chandelier snapped free from the ceiling and came crashing down toward me and Alice.

It passed straight through her, while I dove aside and barely avoided being crushed.

Glass scattered as the chandelier slammed into the marble floor; I threw up an arm to shield my face and ended up with several shards sticking out of my skin.

Wincing, I brushed the glass off and fought my way back to my feet, breathing hard. Caden’s knife was still in my right hand, its grip sweaty under my palm. I didn’t think it was going to do much against this monster, but squeezing it made me feel at least slightly more badass.

“Missed me, asshole,” I snapped.

The Nightmarcher’s smile didn’t fade. “I’ll aim better this time, then.”

His gaze met mine.

I tried to look away, but for some reason I didn’t seem able to. I couldn’t close my eyes, either. They were wide and burning, watching him as he lifted his hand and casually pointed it toward my face.

Pain.

Like a sudden, stabbing headache concentrated behind my left eye.

Dizzy from it, I grappled for the support of the nearest wall as images started to play in my mind—nightmarish visions of soldiers marching, setting fire to everything in their path. Of castles crumbling. Of my four kings divided, battling one another with bloody swords, and a bloody sword in my own hand, impaling me in the chest.

And then silence.

Darkness.

A bed.

A soft light appearing from somewhere. My body, bruised and broken and lying helpless as a man dressed in black approached, reached out a hand and trailed it along my thigh.

“Stop. *STOP!*”

The pressure against my head released. My back was against the wall. I was sliding down it, my knees weak, and I wanted to cry from the sudden relief of the pain in my mind.

The Nightmarcher had gotten frighteningly close to me while I’d been distracted by those awful images.

Alice was watching the two of us, her hands pressed together in front of her, a look of concentration on her face. It was clear she was planning to do something—but what could she really do?

She was essentially a ghost, wasn’t she?

The Nightmarcher seemed to have forgotten she was even there at all.

“Later, then, perhaps,” he said to me. “Another time, another place, when we can more properly face one another, without the complications that this castle and its magic bring with it. Assuming, of course, that you make it out of here alive.”

I pushed away from the wall so that he couldn’t pin me against it.

He looked amused by the movement, and followed me with the smooth, unhurried gait of a well-practiced predator, corralling me toward the stairs.

I attempted to back my way up without taking my eyes off of him, and I made it maybe halfway before I stumbled, catching myself but bending my wrist awkwardly and nearly losing my grip on my knife in the process.

He glanced at the sword in his hand, seemed to think better of it, and sheathed it before bracing an arm against the railing. The light armor he wore rustled and clinked as he leaned toward me.

He wasn't touching me, but he was close enough that he might as well have been.

I couldn't breathe.

My heart pounded, and I tried to focus on each of its frantic beats.

Could I use the Heartstone's magic?

Would it be enough, even without the crown and the power of the kings?

"Just so we're clear," he whispered, "I quite like the idea of you getting away, actually. I love a good chase."

I reacted on instinct. Forgot about my magic, because honestly I just wanted to fucking *stab* this guy—so I gripped the knife as tightly as I could, and I swung toward a bit of exposed skin that I saw on his neck.

As the blade made contact, electricity shot through my arm. I cried out as my hand shook violently. The knife fell, thudded against the carpeted stairs and bounced just out of reach.

The Nightmarcher drew back—but only so that he could patiently watch me as I crumpled. Painful energy continued to racket through my body. I fumbled for the railing, missed, and rolled down the steps and landed in an awkwardly distorted heap at the bottom.

"I can't touch you," he mused, each of his steps unbearably loud as he descended those stairs after me, "so what made you think I wouldn't make sure you couldn't touch *me*, either? Wouldn't be very fair otherwise, would it, you foolish girl?"

He crouched down beside me.

My body continued to tremble with the aftershocks of whatever magic was protecting him. My own magic had flared in response, and now I was cocooned in soft light that at least forced him to keep an arm's-length away from me.

"But as I said before: don't worry," he murmured. "Next time we meet, I promise you, we'll be able to touch one another. And the first thing I'm going to do is repay you for that little attempted stabbing."

I pressed my face against the cool marble floor and tried to get the room to stop spinning.

“So I’ll be looking forward to punishing you,” he added, “and watching you squirm while I do it.”

Somewhere far away, I heard Alice say: “That’s quite enough.”

He stopped at the sound of her quiet, seething voice. Abandoned me, then looked up at her with a smile, “I seem to remember you enjoying the way I made *you* squirm.”

“Be quiet.”

He rose back to his full, impressive height. Clasped his hands behind his back as he walked over to her. “You left out all of those parts in your story earlier, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t happen. You used to love my rough hands. You used to love the way I made you scream. So let’s not pretend that you didn’t play some role in Wonderland’s division, because as I recall, you were only too happy to let me tempt you...and then break you in so many different ways.”

His face was ghostly pale and scarred now, but I could still see the handsome undertones of it, even if I didn’t want to. I could see the alluring, human-like gleam in his eyes, even though I knew he was really an immortal and deadly monster.

I tried to picture how he might have appeared to my great-grandmother all those decades ago.

I *wanted* to understand whatever had happened between them.

But like so many other things in this world, thinking about it just made me feel lost.

“Love is a strong word,” Alice said evenly. “I made a mistake. Alex won’t make the same one. She is going to end you, and you will regret this moment and all of the other moments you tried to attack our bloodline.”

I guess that was a grandma thing, right?

Thinking your grandchildren were *way* more capable than they actually were, even after you just witnessed them tumbling face first down the stairs?

The Nightmarcher wasn’t any more convinced about my world-saving abilities than I currently was.

“We’ll see,” he said, smirking.

Alice’s eyes narrowed.

I got to my feet. Steadied myself. I could sense power building in the air. It wasn’t coming from me, and I didn’t understand it, but my own magic seemed to want to mingle with it.

I had a feeling I should listen to that magic—and that I should probably brace myself.

The Nightmarcher's back was to me. He had closed the space between himself and Alice, and he loomed over her—at least a foot taller—but no matter how close he came, she refused to budge.

“Get out of my castle,” she commanded him in a whisper.

His laughter was soft and taunting. “Make me.”

Her chin lifted at the challenge. Then her hands followed suit, rising into the same position they had been in earlier. Concentration furrowed her brow, and a second later, light was flowing from her heart, ribbons of it swirling around her arms and gathering into a more concentrated form.

The Nightmarcher took a step back.

“Alex,” she said, her voice suddenly breathless and sharp.

“Yes?”

“I’m glad we were able to meet. I wish I could stay, but I’m afraid this is the best I can do.”

Panic raced through me at the thought of being left alone with our enemy.

But before I could object, my great-grandmother swept her hands toward the ceiling. That concentrated red light lifted with the motion— up, up, and further up over the Nightmarcher's head before diving back down and heading straight toward me.

I was still braced for it, but the force of her magic was enough that it nearly knocked me over.

It sank into my chest, and suddenly it felt like my insides were on fire—like I could open my mouth and breathe out the deadly flames. Every hair on my body stood on end. The castle was trembling again, but it was me causing it this time, I think; not on purpose, but the sheer power of *me* had suddenly become almost too much for these walls to hold.

Alice walked to the steps, and her old enemy did nothing to try and stop her from ascending them.

She paused once she'd reached the grey light streaming in through that dirty window, and she turned and looked at me with a tired, but satisfied look.

“The last of me,” she said, almost sleepily. “It should help—but ultimately it won't be enough. You'll need other people. Don't forget that.

You'll need *them*, all of them, and that doesn't make you weak. They'll need you, too."

I was too overwhelmed by the new power coursing through me to properly reply.

She faded slowly before I could find my voice, her body turning to glowing particles that soon became indistinguishable from the daylight.

And just like that, I was once again without my family.

I felt that ringing, familiar pain of emptiness, but I pushed it down as I sensed movement behind me.

"What a waste, giving herself to you like that."

I turned slowly, tempted to test my ability to breathe fire by targeting the Nightmarcher's face.

There was no need for it though, because he almost immediately added, "I'm glad I was able to witness that amusing display—it will be nice note to end this little visit on. And now I'll be bowing out, so that things can continue to go according to plan without my meddling in them."

"According to plan?" I laughed a small, savage laugh that didn't really sound like me at all. "Your plan was to let me find my crown? Because that is exactly what I'm about to do, as soon as you get the hell out of my way. And then you're going to pay."

I was shaking, feeling a little drunk off my new power—but I could feel it now that Alice's magic fully ran through me: that crown was close.

"By all means, recover it," he said. "It won't matter. You had already lost this round even before you stepped foot into this castle."

"You think I'm going to fall for that? For *any* of your lies?"

He only smiled.

"You can't touch me," I reminded him. "Not with your hands, and not with your words, either."

"I still don't need to." His eyes flashed toward the door. "Because they can."

Several loud knocks echoed through the atrium.

"And I imagine it will hurt more, coming from them," the Nightmarcher concluded, his voice dripping with a quiet, sadistic sort of glee.

I didn't want to follow his gaze. I didn't want him to see the sudden fear that had gripped me.

I couldn't help myself, though. I had to look, because suddenly I heard my name—Adrian was calling from the other side of the door, and the voices of the other three kings weren't far behind.

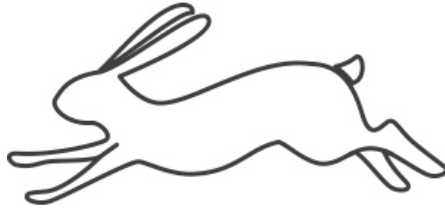
"What will hurt more?" I demanded, glancing back at the Nightmarcher.

He was gone.

But I heard his voice, carried by a cold wind that brushed over the back of my neck and made my shoulders hunch together: "Be careful with your new power. Men have killed for far less," it whispered.

And the pounding at the door continued.

CHAPTER 24



In Which The End Begins

“**W**hat in the hell did you think you were doing?”

Despite the obvious exasperation on his face, Adrian’s voice was calm.

Which was good, because I didn’t trust myself to lose my temper with him at the moment—not when I was still getting used to the feel of that fresh magic burning in my veins.

I still didn’t answer him right away.

“An explanation *would* be nice,” Rhett gently suggested, after a few more moments of silence passed.

Emory had wrapped his arms around me without a word the second they’d all stepped inside, and he hadn’t let go since. I clenched the front of his shirt and held on as if my life depended on it while I tried to get all of the facts straight in my racing mind.

Then I recited those facts as quickly as I could, while all four of them stared at me in astonishment. It was a wild story, I had to admit, even for people who had grown up in a world where recklessly weird and wild were the norm.

For some reason, I left off the last thing the Nightmarcher had said to me.

Because it was stupid, I told myself.

I didn’t need to be careful around these four; I’d had my moments of doubt, but in the end I always decided that I trusted them. They’d proven themselves to me over and over again during the past weeks, hadn’t they?

The Nightmarcher was only trying to divide us, same as he had succeeded in doing with my great-grandmother and her kings.

It was obvious, and I wasn't a fool.

History was *not* going to repeat itself.

"So you can sense the crown?" Rhett asked.

I nodded. "It's definitely here."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Caden asked. "Let's find that sucker and get this over with. I'm getting sort of burned out on this whole adventuring thing."

There was a murmur of agreement from everyone, and we set off toward a long corridor off to the right of the main entryway.

"The throne room should be this direction, if I remember my records correctly," Rhett said.

"It is."

I confirmed it without really thinking about it.

The four of them exchanged a glance, and for a moment Caden blatantly stared at me like I was some kind of weirdo, but ultimately none of them said anything about my strange, newfound certainty about the palace.

It wasn't just the layout I seemed to remember, either.

As we walked down the hall, I felt like the faded carpet and peeling wallpaper were restoring themselves. Like the scent of dust and mold was being overpowered by the spice and sweetness of tea and tarts. We turned a few more corners and the hum of conversation and laughter began to overtake the desolate silence, and soon it was accompanied by music that seemed to pulse from inside the walls.

I kept it all to myself, but the palace was unmistakably alive with memories of bright and strangely dressed people, clearly arriving for a party of some sort. Not *my* memories, and yet...

I was glimpsing them over and over again out of the corner of my eye. I felt like they were collecting in my wake, gathering to watch me pass.

I slowed to a stop and turned so that I could fully take in the colorful assortment of them.

A woman, who was covering the majority of her face with a heart-printed fan, looked up and winked at me.

A man with a tea cup in one hand, tan skin, and deep grey eyes lined in black bowed as our gazes met, tipping his overly large top hat in my direction.

“Alex?”

“Hm?” I looked forward again at the sound of Emory’s voice.

The music faded, along with the colors and memories, and I found myself facing the much bleaker reality of a set of double doors that had slipped from their hinges and now rested precariously, propped against each other at an odd angle.

Through the opening between these fallen doors, a room on the other side was partially visible.

I could see a raised platform. Multiple thrones—the center one lifted above the others—rested on this platform, and they overlooked what appeared to be a massive space.

Behind the thrones was a stained-glass window that took up nearly the entirety of the wall. It appeared to be mostly intact. As dirty as the rest of the glass in this palace, but I could still make out the designs on it. The rabbit and sword crest was in the center, but the other familiar symbols—heart, diamond, spade, and club— were there as well, just as brazen as they’d been on the palace’s front door.

The four who represented those symbols now stood waiting patiently for me to join them by the doorway. My kings. My personal protectors—and the closest thing I had to family now.

We’d started this together, and now we would finish this together.

So it wasn’t *all* bleak, I supposed.

Adrian reached out his hand to me. The same desire that had pulsed through me the very first time I’d seen him ignited in me again, and it brought peace with it. Through all the magic and the strangeness, through arguments and brushes with death, that desire that he’d first stirred in my heart still remained.

If nothing else, I could trust my heart.

And in that heart it felt like I was finally so, so close to where I fully belonged.

I took Adrian’s hand and, flanked closely by the other three, I stepped into the throne room.

It was even larger than it had looked at first glimpse. Dozens of columns helped divide it, but they really didn’t do much to help the

soaring ceilings and white walls feel more intimate.

In one corner there was something of a warmer set up; a table with squishy, mismatched chairs surrounding it. The table was still half-set for tea, it looked like, with empty plates circled around a tarnished silver tea pot and a dozen cups that didn't match any better than the chairs.

I looked away from the set-up and found four doors—two to my left and two to my right—each of them etched with one of those four symbols used by the first Wonderland kings.

Curious, I thought, but I managed to turn my eyes and my attention back to the thrones.

One thing at a time.

We crossed the room mostly in silence—save for Caden, who made it approximately halfway through before he started humming. He kept it up even once we had halted a few feet away from those thrones.

“Will you please stop?” Rhett finally asked.

“I thought we needed dramatic music to go with the dramatic moment.”

“You're an idiot.”

“Also,” Emory pointed out, “this isn't particularly dramatic—kind of anti-climatic, really, because I see no crown.”

Adrian was silently scouring the platform and the area around it, and I did the same.

Our eyes fell on the same clue at exactly the same time: some ten feet from the platform, there was a crack in the otherwise solid and smooth floor. No—*cracks*. Four of them that formed the impression of a rectangle; it wasn't hard to imagine it as a hatch that might open up and reveal a secret passage of some sort.

“A loose bit of floor?” I wondered, walking over and kneeling beside it.

It looked like a separate slab of stone. One that must have been more flush against the rest of the polished floor at one point, but that had long since shifted enough that I was able to get my fingers down into the largest crease.

The stone hardly budged when I pulled on it, but I could have sworn I felt a damp, cool bit of air flooding upward with the tiny bit of movement I did manage.

None of us were able to move it any further.

While the others kept trying, I studied the etchings along the floor. A multitude of carved designs was spaced throughout the entire room, but the design centered on this loose bit of floor was different. It was five separate designs, really—one in each corner, and a fifth in the center of them.

And they corresponded exactly to the designs sewn into the elaborate covers of those chairs on the platform behind us.

“I think we should sit on the thrones,” I thought aloud.

Adrian studied the designs for himself for another moment before he realized what I was seeing, and then he nodded.

“After you, then,” he said.

Rhett offered his arm, escorted me to the raised center of the platform, and then backed away with a slight bow of his head.

It was only a short step up to the chair, but once I reached it I felt like I had scaled a mountain. I looked down and found the four of them hadn’t moved; they were too busy staring at me. It reminded me of when I’d donned that blue dress back in Adrian’s palace.

Except now I wasn’t in a beautiful dress.

I was dirty and bruised, with dried blood on my arm. My hair was a mess and my eyes were probably bloodshot and accented with lovely shades of grey underneath.

But I might as well have been the world’s most beautiful queen, fully dressed and prepared for her coronation day—at least judging by the way they were looking at me.

Soft pink light suddenly surrounded me, hopefully concealing my blush in its glow.

I cleared my throat and nodded toward the other thrones. “Am I going to have to do all of the ruling myself?” I asked, which earned me a chuckle from Emory and Rhett, and an eye-roll from Adrian.

“Not even crowned yet, and she’s already insufferable,” Caden said with a grin—but he was the first to hop up after me.

We exchanged a glance before sinking down into our respective chairs at the same time.

Nothing happened at first.

The others found the thrones that most heavily featured their kingdom’s respective symbols, and soon all five of us were seated side-by-

side. Glancing between them all, a tingling started in my fingertips before racing up my arms and collecting toward my heart.

The light around me began to glow brighter, stronger—

And then it was joined by four other strands of light, from four separate men.

Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

We just watched as a halo of our combined light expanded outwards, down across the floor. It washed over—and lit up—every carving in the floor, every column, every dust-covered painting and suit of armor that lined the vast room.

As it hit the slab of flooring in question, each of the deeply etched symbols burned to life, and they stayed that way for a long moment before the rectangle of stone finally collapsed before our eyes and slid out of sight—sliding down a set of stairs, I guessed. I couldn't really see them from where I sat, but I heard the scrape of stone as the slab went, followed by a distant crash.

“Cool,” Caden said, once the light had settled and the passage remained open and beckoning. “Although pretty abysmal in terms of usability.”

“There's probably another way to open it that doesn't involve all five of us being here,” Rhett pointed out.

“But the important thing is that it's open now,” I said, “So come on.”

I was the first to reach the opening.

I heard singing in the walls again. More memories were flooding me. The crown's power was calling to me, too, and I was suddenly desperate to answer it—all of it—even if it meant descending into pitch darkness.

Adrian caught me by the arm at the foot of the steps, urging me to be careful.

Rhett reached the bottom next, holding out his hand and summoning a flicker of flame to provide us with a makeshift torchlight.

“Should someone stay up above?” Caden suggested, hesitating in the middle of the steps. “It's not like we don't have enemies that might like to come along and ‘accidentally’ shut us away down here in this creepy hole.”

He had a point—somewhere deep in my mind, I knew he did, but I was too distracted to answer him.

“I volunteer,” he added as Emory slipped past him.

“It’s there,” I whispered, already walking forward without them.

I couldn’t even see it yet; I just *knew* it was there.

And I was right.

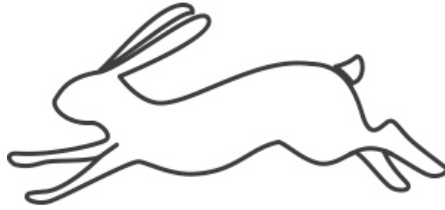
Ten steps forward, and once Rhett’s flame had caught up with me, it lit up a small alcove that looked like it had been carved into the cave-like walls of this bunker—and inside that alcove was a smallish box, its surface free of decoration and nearly the same shade as the stone around it, and inside of *that*...was a crown.

The story was true.

All of this is really coming true.

I swallowed hard, pausing a moment to study the recesses where the five jewels should have been—and then I reached for the crown with trembling hands.

CHAPTER 25



In Which Some Things Begin to Fall Apart

“Nothing’s happening,” Caden said.

“Thank you for the update,” Rhett replied sarcastically.

“Should I try providing us with some dramatic music again? Maybe that would get things going?”

“No,” said Emory.

“Absolutely not,” said Rhett.

I rose from my center throne, wearing the crown and feeling a little silly about it all.

The Heartstone’s light was still glowing through my chest. Whenever my fingers graced that metal crown—particularly when I traced the empty recess that was front and center—the light pulsed weakly.

And that was *all* it did.

Lady Midday had claimed that stone inside of me would come out when the time was right; I guess I’d been hoping that retrieving the crown would be the hardest part, and then everything else would just sort of...fall into place.

But no matter how long I studied the artifact, prodding and poking and trying to will that magic inside of me to manifest into something more tangible, nothing happened.

“Perhaps the other jewels need to be in place first? The ones that we supposedly carry, I mean.” Adrian’s sudden voice startled me a bit; for the past five minutes he’d been silent, one shoulder leaning against the wall and his eyes glazed over in thought.

“A theory worth testing,” Rhett agreed. He seemed to be calculating an exact plan for that testing, and then he said: “The light first appeared between Alex and you, so maybe you’ll get lucky a second time?”

Adrian hesitated only a moment before pushing away from the wall, walking over to us and holding out his hand without saying a word.

I gave him the crown and watched, hopefully, as he placed it on his head.

A little shiver went through me at the sight of it resting there.

I mean, the man could wear a crown.

Unfortunately, as sexy as it looked, it didn’t seem to react to him anymore than it did to me—and the others didn’t have any luck, either.

“Maybe,” Caden said, “we don’t yet have...let’s see, how did that awful woman put it? *A complete devotion to each other?*”

“We made it here, didn’t we?” I said, frowning. “After everything we’ve been through, the fact that we’re still here together seems significant. And after just a couple weeks, I already feel closer to you four than I have to anyone in a long time—what else could we do?”

“I could think of a few things,” he replied with a grin. “More than a few, actually, if you’re willing to be adventurous.”

The tips of my ears burned.

I should have seen that reply coming by this point, probably.

“I’m not sure this is really the time or place,” I stammered.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t thought about it. But *thinking* about it—wanting it, even—was different than actually, you know, doing it.

Doing it.

With four different kings.

Standing here, and facing the multiple thrones while holding the crown that had space for multiple jewels, made it all seem a little more real, and suddenly my face was burning and I couldn’t stop staring at the ground and fidgeting with my hair.

“I have to agree: The dust and gloom of this place aren’t doing a great job of setting the mood,” Emory said, coming to my rescue.

“You just lack imagination,” Caden informed him.

Emory ignored the comment. He walked away from us and strolled through the room, searching, lost in thought for a few minutes before pausing in front of one of those four doors—the one with his own kingdom’s old symbol on it.

My eyes locked on that diamond as well, and an idea flashed in my mind: “I wonder what’s behind all these doors?”

“The key to unlocking each of the respective king’s magic?” he suggested, voicing my own thoughts.

I strode quickly toward him, a rush of excitement and possibility overtaking me. As I got closer to the door, I saw that there was no handle on it; only a square of white marble where one should have been.

Emory tentatively reached out and pressed his hand against that white panel.

When nothing happened, I stepped closer and placed my hand over his, letting my fingers sink down between his until they rested against the cool stone as well.

The door rumbled.

Its hinges squeaked.

And then it slowly swung open to reveal a small sitting room with diamond-shaped windows and multiple pieces of furniture covered in white sheets.

The others filed over to us, studying the new opening with a mixture of suspicion and cautious optimism.

Adrian moved first, trying to lead the way inside—

And he was immediately thrown backwards as he hit an invisible forcefield of some kind.

Energy pulsed visibly through him as he dropped to one knee, bracing a hand against the ground and grimacing in pain. I rushed toward him, but he waved me off before I could touch his electrified, trembling skin.

The opening to the sitting room crackled with more of that dangerous electricity, but Emory was undeterred. He swallowed hard and then reached out his hand again.

It passed though the barrier without so much as a spark.

“Apparently, this is a picky door,” Rhett said.

I stepped back toward it. I could sense the protests coming, so I held my breath and thrust out a hand before they could stop me.

I think it was a full minute before I released that breath I held, finally convinced that it wasn’t going to be electrocuted to death.

I hopped the rest of the way across the threshold, closed my eyes and took another deep breath before turning back to the others.

“Me and Emory are the chosen ones, looks like.”

“I don’t like this,” Adrian said, his breathing still a bit labored as he fought his way back to his feet.

“And I don’t like it when you get electrocuted,” I replied flatly.

“So we don’t seem to have a choice,” Emory said, quietly following me to the other side. “Unless you have another plan? We’ve already spent too much time trying to figure this out.”

Adrian looked like he was considering crossing the magic forcefield again to get to me, so before he could do something so stupid I added: “We’ll be fine. We’ll explore a bit and then come right back.”

Rhett and Caden didn’t look any more enthusiastic about this plan than Adrian did, but none of them seemed to be able to come up with any other ideas. I didn’t want to waste any more time, so I clenched the crown in my hands tighter, and I moved further inside.

“See you in a minute,” I said, as cheerfully as I could manage.

Emory took my hand as we turned and faced the room before us.

We’d taken maybe five steps into it when the door slammed shut behind us.

“Well that seems...ominous,” I said. “And the others are *definitely* freaking out now, I’d guess. As am I.”

“We’re fine,” Emory assured me, giving my hand a little squeeze.

I nodded, squeezing him back and attempting to breathe deep, relaxing breaths. If I could feel ‘fine’ with anyone in these circumstances, it would have been him. That calmness he radiated was part of the reason I hadn’t hesitated to explore behind his corresponding door first.

I cared for all of them, and I knew they would have protected me equally well—but Emory had been the one I’d trusted the most in the beginning, and that hadn’t changed; the feeling had only gotten stronger.

One more thing my heart had gotten right.

With the door closed and the light from the throne room’s giant windows gone, our surroundings were much darker. There were tiny slits near the ceiling that let in light from outside, but it was a meager amount, and those ceilings soared at least twenty feet above us.

I felt my way around in the near-darkness, bumping into the blanketed furniture several times and cursing, and then finally spotting a weird looking lamp on a short table in the corner. I didn’t have high hopes that it would work.

But this world had surprised me before, so I knelt beside the table.

“You want me to hold that?” Emory asked, pointing to the crown that I was in danger of dropping as I fumbled with the lamp’s stupidly elaborate switches and pull-chains.

I handed it over.

As it left my hands, I felt a strange, stabbing pain in my chest.

I ignored that pain as a flame finally flickered to life within the glass globe of the lamp, casting a warm orange glow over us. I stayed crouched beside it for a moment, taking in the sight of a room that was actually much larger than it had seemed—or that at least appeared that way, maybe thanks to the massive mirror on the far wall.

Emory was staring into that mirror, and in his reflection I saw a haunted, distant look in his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

I didn’t think he’d heard me at first. But as soon as I started to speak again, he interrupted—

“Did you mean it?” His tone was hushed. “The other night, when you said you wouldn’t blame me for choosing to save my brothers?”

I gripped the side of the table and pulled myself up. “Of course I did. But why...”

“Good.”

He turned so we were face-to-face. Both of his hands were on that crown, clenching it so tightly that it was turning his knuckles white and making his arms shake.

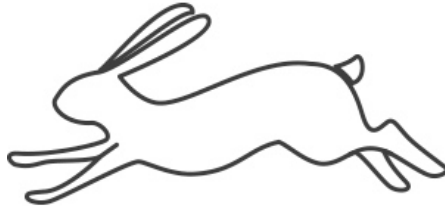
That pain in my chest was suddenly so intense that I could barely stand.

I wasn’t entirely sure why, but I wanted to look away from him. No—I wanted *him* to look away from *me*.

But he didn’t.

He was still staring at me, that haunted look still in his eyes, as the mirror behind him began to ripple.

CHAPTER 26



In Which Those Things Fall All the Way Apart

So my trusted heart, it turned out, was a lying piece of shit.

And I swear it was shattering into a thousand tiny shards as I watched Lady Midday step out of the glass, and then thank Emory for his help as he handed her the crown.

“What is going on?” I whispered.

Lady Midday’s smile was sickly sweet. “Why, my dear Emory has proven as useful as I knew he could be, of course.”

“Useful...”

“I needed you five to break into that vault and retrieve my crown for me, and then I needed him to deliver it—which he’s done.”

“*Your* crown?”

“It would be stronger in your hands, and with the jewels intact, perhaps,” she said, “but personally I think it looks better on me.” She plopped it down on her wild, wavy mass of hair, turned to the mirror and struck several poses before continuing: “And it is still plenty powerful as-is, so long as you know how to use it. Which I do, of course.”

I wanted to crumple to the ground. To bury myself under the sheets covering the furniture in this room, to scale the wall up to those skinny windows and fling myself out one of them.

To die, basically.

I felt so, so *stupid*—and angry.

That anger is what kept me on my feet, and I narrowed my eyes at Emory and, nearly breathless from the pain in my heart, I demanded:

“How could you?”

“Don’t be too harsh on him, my dear,” Lady Midday interrupted. “I simply offered him a fantastic deal in return for his help. A few lives in exchange for this simple crown...it was the right thing for him to do, really.”

It only took me a moment to put two and two together.

“Your brothers?”

Emory nodded. Once. Slowly.

The explanation didn’t make that pain in my heart lessen.

“I trusted you. More than any of the others, maybe. And I said I would help you save your family myself—did you think I was lying? Or did you think I couldn’t do it? You said I was a perfectly queenlike, remember? *How many times did you tell me that?* That I was strong enough, that I could handle all these terrible things. Those were all lies too, weren’t they? You *asshole*, you obnoxious piece of shit, you...you—”

I sucked in a deep breath.

I couldn’t even think of an insult bad enough to throw at him.

He kept quiet and still, and simply took the verbal beating—which just made me even angrier.

“And *you*—you were supposed to be on our side too!” I rounded on Lady Midday, because I had the sudden, fierce urge to hit someone, and for some reason I still didn’t want to hit Emory.

She pointed to herself and pretended to look shocked. “Did I actually say that?”

“It was *implied*.”

“You should know better than to make assumptions in this world, silly girl. You were bound to lose as soon as you started doing that.”

You had already lost this round even before you stepped foot into this castle.

The Nightmarcher’s words whispered through my head, and the last pieces of this shit-puzzle clicked into place.

“You’re working for *him*, aren’t you?”

I didn’t have to elaborate on who I meant.

She turned the crown over and around in her hands several times, still smiling that saccharine smile, before glancing up at me from underneath her long, gold-painted lashes. “I will make a fine queen when he becomes the one and only king of Wonderland, don’t you think?”

My eyes darted around the room, desperately seeking a weapon of some sort.

There were curved swords similar to the one in Alice's crest hanging on the far wall. They looked dull—clearly meant for decoration, not battle—but they were better than nothing.

I marched over to them.

Beneath the hanging swords was a table that was unsurprisingly littered with all the china needed to throw an elaborate tea party.

"How amusing," Lady Midday said as I started to climb on the table and reach for the weapons above it.

I started to kick the tea set irritably out of my way, but stopped as I heard her moving closer to me, her dress swishing and her jewelry clanging as she came. Rage coursing through me, I snatched up the largest of the porcelain tea pots, turned, and I flung it at her face.

Those many years of softball as a teenager had paid off; my throw caught her off guard, and the pot smashed into her head hard enough to knock that stolen crown slightly askew.

"Look at that—I've finally found a use for all the damn tea in this world."

"You will regret that," she growled, wiping at the chips of porcelain clinging to her face.

I snatched a cup and threw it.

She knocked it aside and glared at me as she straightened the stolen crown.

I threw two more cups, but she sidestepped them and rushed toward me.

I jumped and wrapped my arms around one of the sword's handles, using my weight to yank it from the wall. My balance teetered a bit as I landed, but I found it and, clutching my newly-acquired weapon, I scrambled across the table and jumped down.

As I turned, Lady Midday pulled a knife from underneath the white cloak she wore. She pointed it toward me, and it began to glow—and then to lengthen into a full-sized sword.

One that was a hell of a lot sharper than the one I held.

Well, fuck.

I took a deep breath and commanded myself not to panic.

I didn't have to beat her in a sword-fight. I just needed to get that crown back and then get the hell out of this room, so I gripped the sword tighter and fixed my stance.

I was surprised at the way I didn't shake. My eyes didn't blur with tears, either; they were sharp and focused on what I had to do.

Maybe Emory had been lying when he said I was queenlike—but I didn't care.

In this moment, I would be a queen, and I *would* get my crown back.

I lifted my sword, aimed, and threw.

Lady Midday ducked, which is precisely what I'd been hoping for; I wasn't aiming for her head. I was aiming for that crown—which I successfully speared, sending it flying from her head.

I was already sprinting toward it before it even clattered against the ground.

I snatched it up mid-run and kept going. I hadn't figured out exactly how I was going to get back through that door that had slammed itself shut, but I was sort of making this up as I went.

The crown was helping me feel a little more confident, at least; as soon as my grip on it was secure, I felt power surging through me. That pain in my heart was still there, but the pulse of magic made it easier to ignore for now. Everything was still wrong, all wrong, but I was a survivor, and I planned to get out of this alive and deal with that pain later.

I approached the door, and I saw a panel similar to the one that had been on the outside.

I didn't know if it would work with only my touch.

And I never found out.

Because just before my fingertips could graze it, Lady Midday appeared and knocked me aside.

I landed awkwardly but stayed on my feet, stumbling, trying to put space between myself and her. I ended up dead ending at the wall that held the mirror she'd stepped out of.

She slammed into me and sent me crashing into the wall hard enough that the mirror fell, striking my head and shoulder on the way to the ground and causing my vision to flicker.

I struggled to stay awake, to inch away from the mess of glass around me.

Lady Midday readjusted her grip on her sword.

I tasted blood on my lips.

I hugged the crown against my chest and closed my eyes.

Seconds passed. The blade never struck me. I heard sounds of a scuffle, opened my eyes and saw Emory slamming Lady Midday into the wall a few feet away.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt her,” he growled, “That was part of the deal we made.”

She yanked him closer to her, her eyes livid and her voice pure, purred venom as she said: “Well it looks like I *lied*.”

She shoved him back. Or tried to, at least. When he proved to be physically stronger, she resorted to magic instead—the air around her body simmered with it, tiny little bolts of light that eventually burned so brightly that Emory was forced to take a step back.

As soon as he did, she immediately turned and raised her sword toward me again.

“I might not have bothered to kill you if you hadn’t been so annoying,” she said.

I tried to get to my feet, but I was too slow.

Emory was quicker.

So quick that I didn’t realize what had happened at first. All I knew was he was between me and Lady Midday, and her blade still didn’t touch me, and for some reason there was a sudden ringing in my ears—a ringing that grew louder and louder, drowning out all the other sounds in the room. And then...

Silence.

Only our breaths interrupted it. So I was very aware of the way mine were so tightly held, while his became more rapid, more shallow.

White light—the same light that had appeared around him and the others when they’d taken their thrones earlier—blossomed from his chest and enveloped me.

When the warmth and glow of it was gone, I looked down at the crown in my hands.

I watched as a soft blue sapphire appeared in one of its empty spaces.

Instead of awe and excitement at the sight of it, it was dread that curled through me.

I caught Emory as he fell forward. My hands wrapped around him and immediately found blood—too much blood between his shoulder blades,

too much of it still flowing and dampening his shirt. The sword had cut straight through the thin chainmail he wore; the scent of burnt metal and skin made me think that magic of some sort had accompanied the stabbing.

Lady Midday had frozen in place, staring at that blue jewel that had just appeared, curiosity lighting her wicked eyes.

In that moment I hated her more than anything I'd ever hated in my life.

"So it was true." The words fell from Emory's lips in between soft gasps for breath. "That was inside of me after all, just waiting to be drawn out."

"No, no...not like this....this isn't right. This isn't how it happens, this isn't the sort of devotion you were supposed to show. *This isn't right.*"

"It isn't, is it? Not quite." He smiled weakly, and started to drift off before I readjusted my grip and cradled him so I could better see his face.

"Keep your eyes open," I commanded. "This doesn't end here."

"Right," he agreed. "Because we had plans."

"Lots of them."

"We were going to dance at my palace when it was restored, if I recall correctly."

"Exactly," I said, my voice cracking.

"You still will?"

I nodded.

I wanted to tell him that I would find some way to forgive him. That we would move past it, and we would restore his palace as planned. We would restore Wonderland as planned. We could still fix all of this, *somehow...*

Couldn't we?

There was still too much blood flowing over my hands. He was growing too cold, and I couldn't speak for a long time, and neither did he.

"This isn't right," I finally managed to repeat again, helplessly.

He didn't respond.

I felt a sob rising in my throat, but Lady Midday cut it off—

"Never fear—you can go with him. I'll be happy to put an end to your pain."

The sword in her hands sparked with magic as she lifted it above her head.

She swung.

I pulled Emory tighter against me. I felt his breathing stop. I felt the crown's five points stabbing between us, felt every ache and pain that these past weeks had brought with them, and in an instant I realized it had all been in vain: I hadn't finished this with my kings, the way it had started. Emory was gone, and now I was going to die alone.

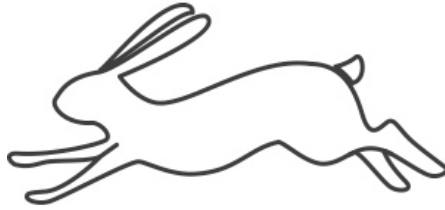
I screamed.

No sound came out.

The only thing that came out of me was the same rose-colored light that had started all of this. It roared out of my body, and it didn't stop until I was so weak that my vision finally flickered out completely.

I felt the room spinning, but I was gone before I hit the floor.

CHAPTER 27



In Which I Climb Out of the Rabbit Hole

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The only reason I woke up, I think, was so I could tell someone to stop that fucking annoying beeping.

Everything was blurry. My eyes were swollen, forcing me to squint at everything—the blinking machines and the IVs I was hooked to, the muted TV mounted in the corner, the drab landscape painting on the far wall.

A hospital.

A young nurse wearing scrubs with pink hearts on them shuffled into the room. Her eyes were glued to the chart in her hands until I gave a small cough, at which point her gaze immediately flicked toward me.

“Oh, hello!” Her smile was practiced and efficient.

“Where am I?”

“Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte,” she replied, setting the chart down and moving to check the bags of fluid on my IV stand. “And I’m glad you’ve decided to join us here—back in the land of the awakened.”

“How did I get *here*?”

“I’m afraid we’re still trying to figure that out.” She gave me a sympathetic look as practiced as her smile. “The doctor will want to run lots of tests now that you’re awake, and hopefully we can figure something out.”

“Tests...”

“Don’t worry, they won’t be anything too bad. And you’ve got that good-looking guy to hold your hand throughout them, at least.”

“I do?”

“Your fiancé, right? Bryce Anderson?”

“My fiancé?”

“You remember him, don’t you?” She laughed softly, but then her face quickly fell, as if it had just occurred to her that I actually *could* have memory loss of some sort.

Was that what the fog in my brain was?

“Oh, right,” I continued, because she still seemed a bit mortified over what she’d said, and I felt bad for her. “Of course I remember.”

Vaguely.

“Can I see him?” I asked.

She smiled, looking relieved to have an exit strategy. “Sure. I believe he said he was going to the cafeteria; I’ll go see if I can track him down.”

She changed out a bag of fluids on the IV stand and then disappeared, and five minutes later, a man walked in.

“Hey Alex,” he said, softly.

I stared at him.

He had short dark hair, golden eyes, and a sharp chin. He carried himself like a business man, and the pressed khakis and button-up shirt he wore made me even more certain that he was just stopping in on the way to his office.

This was my fiancé?

The only thing not formal about his appearance was a tattoo on his wrist that I just barely glimpsed under his cuffed sleeve; it looked like it was of a heart wrapped in thorns.

I’d seen that symbol somewhere before, but I couldn’t remember where.

“You’re Bryce,” I said, trying to sound more sure of myself than I had with the nurse.

He nodded. “It’s so nice to hear you say my name again,” he said, smiling down at me.

I tried to smile back at him, but it must have come out more like a grimace, because his cheery expression wavered.

“Do you remember anything that happened before you passed out?” he asked, sinking partially down onto the bed beside me.

I started to shake my head.

And then I realized—I actually *did* remember something.

Sort of.

“I feel like...like I was with someone? I think they might be hurt. We need to find them...” Panic that I didn’t fully understand gripped me, and I started to fling the blankets off myself, painfully yanking on the needles in my veins in the process.

Bryce moved swiftly, carefully grabbing my arms and guiding me back down into the pillows.

“Easy,” he soothed. “The doctors said you might feel a little panicky when you woke up. It’s normal. Like you just came out of a nightmare, maybe.”

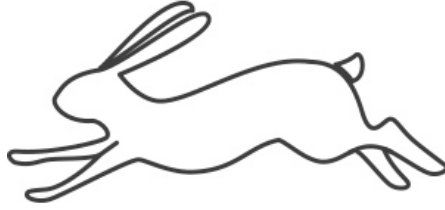
“Sorry I... You’re right.” His arms were strong, and the pillows blissfully cool. I could feel myself starting to drift off again already. “They were just strange dreams, probably....” I murmured.

“That’s right,” he replied.

“*Really* strange dreams.”

“It’s okay.” He smoothed a bit of my sweaty hair away from my face. “I’m sure your dreams were terrifying,” he whispered in that same soothing voice as before. “But don’t worry: You’re with me, and it’s all over now.”

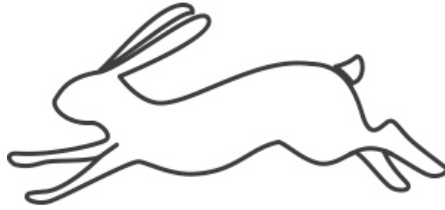
BOOK TWO IS COMING SOON!



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